

The BC Adult Literacy Cost-Shared Program

Dancing in the Dark

How do Adults with Little Formal
Education Learn?
How do Practitioners do
Collaborative Research?

by

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Message to Readers

Welcome to Dancing in the Dark. In this research project we attempt to answer two questions. In both, there is a set of intricate steps that involve others: dancing. In both, there is a lack of formal training, education or certification to *permit* the dancers to do what they are doing: dance.

In the first question, “How do adults with little formal education learn?” we look at people who did not complete grade 12 but who learn each and every day in order to get on with their lives. In the second question, “How do literacy practitioners do collaborative research?” we look at how four literacy practitioners, with no formal education in research, carry out a collaborative literacy research project.

When we started this project, we, the practitioners, felt we knew the answers to the first question. And if you are a practitioner, you may also be familiar with the stories that answer the first question. In that case, we have collected the data and documented the findings. We put them into words and onto paper. They can now be quoted, used, debated and discussed. They no longer reside only in our collective heads. If you are not a literacy practitioner, this project will open your eyes to how this diverse, often stereotyped group of people, adults with little formal education, learns the skills and information they need to lead their lives.

The second question was tougher, but we trusted our guide and mentor and our own abilities to improvise to get us through. We thought we knew what we were doing; it would be a cakewalk. We knew we had much to learn; it became a tango. Only Marina had formal education in research and knew what we were getting into. We relied on her to show us the steps. We tried our own choreography. We decided to take leaps, to completely leave out steps that in traditional research are considered sacred. We took turns leading; we took turns shuffling. All of us know of a time we tripped, a time we sashayed. But the composition progressed.

Right from the start, another form of darkness was present. Geographic isolation. We are scattered across the province, forcing us to rely heavily on email, teleconferences and occasional face-to-face meetings. Not an easy way to dance. When we did come together for short intense sessions, we had fun. We laughed and we cried, sometimes at the same time. We learned things about each other. We learned things about ourselves. About dancing and about darkness. About our students. About being students. About being instructors.

This report is the story of the two dances in the dark. The learning dance told here by a few people in BC, but made every day by people with little formal education all over Canada, as they try to live in a world that values education. And the research dance told by a few literacy practitioners in BC as they tripped, stomped and waltzed into a discipline new to them.

We know that as you read this report you will reflect not only on our participants and their learning, but also on your own ways of learning. Of times you have danced in the dark. We are exploring two questions; we hope they will trigger many more as you jig, two-step or reel through our findings. The floor is yours.

Introduction

Four members of the research team (Darcy Allen, Paula Davies, Kate Nonesuch and Bonnie Soroke) came together at a workshop on research methods for literacy practitioners in Vancouver in October 2000. The session was sponsored by the Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology (C2T2) through a grant from the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS-HRDC) and the BC Ministry of Advanced Education (AVED) and was facilitated by Marina Niks and Colleen Reid. Marina invited those participants who were interested to start thinking and talking to each other about the possibility of forming a group to do a collaborative research project. At that point, and encouraged by the response shown to a month-long electronic exchange led by Allan Quigley, Marina suggested that one possible question to research could be: “How do adults with little formal education learn?” Paula, Kate and Darcy showed interest and Marina encouraged them to talk about how such a project would look and to start deciding on a question they wanted to pursue. Paula and Kate had worked together years before and Darcy was eager to work with other women who had experience in the field. It was this opportunity to work together and not solely the specific question that encouraged these practitioners to enter into a working relationship.

Having decided to use the original question, Darcy, Paula and Kate asked Marina if she would coordinate the project. Marina agreed and they started working during the workshop on focusing the topic and the project, and later over email developing the proposal. At the workshop, Bonnie, a graduate student, was interested in the collaborative aspect of the project and offered her assistance in the project in the role of literature support person.¹ We thought we could broaden the team in order to get a wider perspective and invited Dee McRae to join us. As Dee was at that time involved in the Literacy Research Circles and was considering a project with a similar theme, she accepted our proposal.² In February 2001 we secured funding and started the project in April 2001.³

So, how do adults with little formal education learn? When we set out to research this question, it was important to us to address the following four areas:

- 1) Identify the ways in which adults with little formal education learn,
- 2) Generate new ideas about how society can support adults with little formal education,
- 3) Involve local literacy practitioners and learners in community-based research, and
- 4) Support and encourage province-wide collaborative research efforts.

As a collaborative project, we wanted to allow each researcher to identify and use research techniques that best suited the researcher and her community and would provide data for the question we had chosen. The outcomes that we visualized for this project were the

¹ Bonnie had already worked in supporting literacy practitioners establish a conversation with current research literature.

² The Literacy Research Circles was a SSHRC funded research project between Simon Fraser University and Literacy BC to explore the possibilities of training and supporting literacy practitioners to do research.

³ Funding for this project was provided by the Adult Literacy Cost-Shared Program of the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS-HRDC) and the BC Ministry of Advanced Education (AVED).

development of recommendations of different ways in which to support adults learning outside of the formal system, and to design and document a structure for collaborative research across regions and between practitioners and academics.

As a result, this document addresses two questions:

- 1) How do adults with little formal education learn?
- 2) How do literacy practitioners do collaborative research?

Because this is a collaborative effort, the voice of this paper changes. Sometimes we have indicated who is speaking, but most often you will read the words of the team as a single voice and in the third person. As you read this report, you will find the traditional chapters found in a research report—chapters on the literature, methodology, data analysis and conclusions. You will also find that we have addressed some of these chapters in a non-traditional manner. We hope this report will challenge traditional understandings of what a research report must contain.

In the literature chapter, “The Literature Review we didn’t do,” we reflect on the role that the literature had in our project. We use the metaphor of dance to describe our struggle to establish a relationship with the current literature on adult learning.

The methodology chapter describes how we collected the data to answer our first research question. After describing how the team worked together to design the data collection tools, each researcher assumes her own voice to describe how she individualized the group’s method to collect data and the methodological issues she encountered. We then describe how we analysed the data.

“Data Analysis 1: How do Adults with Little Formal Education Learn?” is divided into four sections following the themes that emerged from the data analysis:

- 1) Learning Strategies—how this group of adults learns;
- 2) Life Experiences—the effects of life experiences on participants’ learning;
- 3) Agency—factors that contribute to an individual’s ability to get what they want; and
- 4) Emotion—the importance of emotion on choice of learning strategies.

The next chapter, “How do Adults with Little Formal Education Learn? One Learner’s Answer,” pulls together the themes described above to help explore how they come together in one person.

“Date Analysis 2: How do Practitioners do Collaborative Research?” follows with an exploration of the second key question of this project. The chapter explores many facets of collaborative practitioner research.

The last chapter presents conclusions and recommendations that may seem idealistic to some but truly appear to the authors as essential to the well being of adults with little formal education and for this province as a whole.

The final pages contain the appendices. It is here that you will meet the researchers and the people who shared their stories.

The Literature Review we didn't do

This chapter traces our experience with the concept of a literature review and explores how we interacted at different times with the literature, and with the intentions, tasks and products of a literature review.

A literature review is a survey of the knowledge of an area of study already amassed. The goal of a literature review is to enter a conversation that exists in the field of study and show who is participating and what are the various arguments being discussed. For academic researchers, these conversations are represented in the literature. New research may grow out of that literature, but no new research can be fruitful without taking into account what others have written. However, in research done by practitioners the ongoing conversations they have with one another, which are based on their shared experience in the classroom, serve some of the same functions of a literature review.

From the beginning we struggled with the literature review. Our struggles included questions about the values and content of a literature review, practitioner knowledge and whose role it is to do a literature review. Marina brought the academic viewpoint and the experience of working with the literature. The practitioners on the team also knew that a literature review was a necessary part of a traditional research project, although did not have a concrete and detailed concept of what that entailed. During the process of doing the research team members read articles offered by Marina about doing interviews, doing research, collaboration and adult participation in and attitudes about literacy and adult basic education programs. Towards the end of the process, Bonnie spent time formally searching for literature about how adults with little formal education learn.

Dancing with the Literature: We Waltzed but we did not Tango

Looking back we realize that while we attempted to establish an in-depth conversation with the literature at different times, it did not happen. As we jokingly commented, rather than engage with it in a scholarly fashion, we danced with the literature. We waltzed with it, gracefully looking for readings that easily and elegantly applied to our focus. However, while we waltzed, we did not tango, which would have brought a deeper and more aggressive energy to seeing where and how our topic and findings could fit with the literature.

Our research question arose in some way from the literature. At the Adult Education Research Conference⁴ Allan Quigley presented his thoughts on how most of the knowledge on adult literacy is based on research done with educated adults.⁵ He called for research to be done with adults with little formal education. Later Marina summarized this

⁴ The Adult Education Research Conference was held in Vancouver, British Columbia in June 2000.

⁵ Quigley, Allan (2000). Beyond participation and stereotypes: Towards the study of engagement in adult literacy education. AERC, Proceedings of the 41st Annual Adult Research Conference. UBC: Vancouver, BC.

article and posted it on the Research sub-conference of The Hub⁶ to generate discussion. Hub subscribers participated actively and with interest in presenting their ideas both after the summary was posted, and later that year in an online discussion that Quigley facilitated on that same topic. In this discussion Quigley reiterated the interest the field had in pursuing the question:

But I was—and am—really interested in what should be a simple question and I'm just delighted there may be some who share this interest with me. Namely, just: "How, where, when, and why do adults with low levels of formal schooling learn?" ... One of the biggest conundrums we have in literacy, I think, is that we [the literate of society] have an idea that those who can't read, or who read with difficulty, learn "just like us." So we tend to teach the way we learned. But is this the best way to think about this? ... What could we learn from our learners? How does THEIR learning happen exactly?⁷

Marina thought that the question might be one that would bring practitioners together for a collaborative project. She suggested it at a training workshop in October 2000. Participants were not especially enticed by the proposed question but were interested in some aspects related to it such as the idea that not all adults with little formal education necessarily need to attend programs, or even learn how to read and write, and the role of society in accepting and supporting adults with little formal education in leading fulfilling lives. Paula, Kate, Dee and Darcy were willing to work with the research question. Seen this way, it was the discussion on the literature that initiated our work.

When we wrote the funding proposal for this study, Marina suggested that we should look at the literature to frame the proposal and justify the need for the study based on what has been written on the topic. Other team members, who had written many Adult Literacy Cost-Shared Program proposals, thought it unnecessary. In their experience they had not used the literature to frame other projects. This was however the first research project they were writing a proposal for and therefore we negotiated and our draft proposal included a reference to Quigley's paper referred to above (see footnote 5).

Traditionally, there are different times when researchers refer to the literature to frame their work. At the beginning of a project researchers look to learn what research has been done on the topic being studied, what questions have been asked and how the data to answer those questions was collected. We took it on Quigley's authority that the question of how adults with little formal education learn had not been posed. This assumption we thought would allow us to design and start our research without doing an initial wider literature search. When Bonnie was asked to look at the literature she found that there are mismatches between perceptions of the needs of adult learners and the expressed needs of adult learners (literature since the late 1980s). Confirming our initial perception, much of the research literature that was found involved an exploration of the why's of non-

⁶ The Hub is an electronic network and conferencing service for the BC Literacy community. The Hub is managed by Literacy BC in partnership with Capilano College. The communication system within the Hub is called First Class. The Hub is funded by the National Literacy Secretariat (HRDC) and the BC Ministry of Advanced Education (AVED). Visit <http://www.nald.ca/Province/Bc/Lbc/electric.htm> and click on electronic conferencing network.

⁷ Quigley, Allan. Oct 2 2000, Subject: Hi everyone. From online private discussion *Learning From Learners*.

participation in literacy education, with recommendations that in-depth qualitative research is needed to look at this target population.

There is little adult education literature that could be directly compared to our study because most research looks at learning within educational environments. An Internet search using “adult learning” as the key words resulted in over 600 hits. The first 350 referred to learning in programs or school settings. Very few studies considered learning outside the educational environment or institution, and thus the whole premise of our research differs from what these researchers were doing in their study.

We discussed what questions and focus we would have for our project and, based on the idea that this has not been researched before, we designed an exploratory study. We were going to ask open questions and let participants’ answers determine where we would go with our analysis.

Another time when researchers traditionally turn to the literature is when, working with the data, they start to explore the emerging themes. It is then that they look for other researchers’ work to see what has been discussed regarding the themes that are emerging. Once our themes started to unfold, we again asked Bonnie to search for any literature related to the emerging themes. This process however proved frustrating. Researchers felt they did not have enough time to sort through the summaries Bonnie sent to see if authors were using the terms in the same ways they were. Team members read the summaries but for the most part, they did not read the articles or do any further literature search. The summaries of articles simply did not speak to team members in a way that pulled them to read more or to use the pieces in their analysis.

Several team members had vigorous connections with some pieces of literature that we thought might apply to adults with little formal education who were not in programs. We wanted to connect our project to the literature we know and know well – the literature that reports more on the findings and less on the process. These included *Naming the Magic*⁸ and *Too Scared to Learn*.⁹ However, in the process of analysing the data and writing the report we did not use these readings in any way. Through all this Marina stood back, not wanting to impose the academic stance on our process. She patiently waited as we created a dance of our own.

We know there is something important here, in the different relationship that practitioners and academics have with the literature, and we have struggled to capture exactly what it is. As we reflected on how we dealt with (or didn’t deal with) the literature, we were encouraged to look at this process because it was telling us something about how we, as practitioners do research. As was the case with other areas of the research process, we were very aware that we wanted this project to be guided by the practitioners on the team. (We describe this issue in more detail in “Data Analysis 2: How do Practitioners do Collaborative Research?”)

⁸ Evelyn Battell, *Naming the Magic: Non-Academic Outcomes in Basic Literacy*. BC Ministry of Advanced Education, 2001.

⁹ Horsman, Jennifer, *Too scared to learn: women, violence and education*, Toronto: McGilligan Books, 1999.

When we met in February 2002 to collaborate on writing the final report, we again considered the question of the literature review. When Marina and Bonnie talked about the importance of the literature, everyone was aware they were talking from their academically trained perspective. When we looked at the tasks we had still to do in writing the report, and thought about the energy that a full literature review would take, the practitioners on the team balked. We could not and would not do one. We discussed options such as not including a literature chapter in the report or paying somebody to do a literature review for us. We could “fake” a literature review or sprinkle our report with a few quotations from the articles Bonnie had found, but we did not take these possibilities seriously. We decided to use the literature review placeholder as an opportunity to review not strictly the literature, but rather its role in our project and our reflections on it.

Two Left Feet

We tried to understand why we did not accept the invitation to dance with the literature and played with various answers. We think this is an important issue that practitioners engaged in research and those who support them should be aware of. Therefore, we decided to dedicate a section of this chapter to explore the possible answers we established as to why we could not participate in a conversation with the literature:

- there was little literature to draw upon,
- we suffered from a lack of energy, time and money, and/or
- the role of literature in research projects that involve practitioners as researchers may be different from that of more traditional research.

No Literature Available

As described above we looked for articles on our research topic and mostly found in the literature on adult learning a lack of focus on adults with little formal education outside of educational settings. It is in that sense that we feel this project contributes to an emerging area of study.

Bonnie offered to summarize for team members the research literature that she came across. She spent ten hours searching for specific topics that group members mentioned—adult learning, agency, and self-esteem literature related to our themes and reported back to us. She then email ed short summaries and categorized lists of the research literature to the group. There was a request from one researcher for more specific topics in the literature that Bonnie was unable to uncover. In retrospect, it may have been unfair to ask someone other than one of the researchers to make decisions about what was useful and what was not. Bonnie reflects on trying to stay connected to make her contributions useful:

In the position of a semi-outsider of this research group, I had a difficult time in figuring out how I could best “help” them with their literature search. Through my thesis research work in graduate school, I’ve learned that a literature review is a highly personalized process. The literature used by any researcher evolves over a long period of time as each person follows their interests and explores the issues arising from the research. I wanted to find ways to respond to the needs and interests of four different researchers. I wanted to be clear on the

direction they chose to go in their analysis in order to supply literature to help support that process.

Exploring the literature to search for writings on emerging themes is quite an idiosyncratic process. The researcher who sees the theme emerge in the words of the participants is probably the best person to see if and how this theme is dealt with in the literature. Asking someone else to look for useful references presents challenges of its own and it is a strategy that needs to be examined closer.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, though intrigued, we were not passionate about the research question. Inevitably this may have influenced our interest and willingness to dedicate time to reading about the topic and related topics. Intuitively, we all agree that there is probably literature about the emerging themes in our data that might have helped frame our findings within the literature. We did not explore these connections in this project.

Lack of Energy, Time and Money

When we began to collaborate on writing the report, we were ready to be finished with the project. All of us had already used all the hours we had anticipated dedicating to the project and some of us had moved on to other projects. We were writing the report on our own time, during evenings and weekends. When we looked at the work that needed to be done, we decided to focus on finishing the data analysis and write a truthful account of our dance with the literature. The emails flew back and forth about this question, and Paula expressed the consensus:

I STRONGLY disagree with the entire notion that we didn't do a literature review because we were tired, lazy, or out of money and time. I think the reasons we didn't are much more profound than that and I think the fact that we are all still working on the beast seven months after we were supposedly too tired proves that lack of energy or commitment WAS NOT the issue. (Email from Paula, September 13, 2002)

The Role of Literature in Practitioner Research

As we began writing this chapter, we realized that even if we had had the resources to conduct a literature review, we would have probably directed them to a different task. While the practitioners on the team were willing to put unpaid hours into those areas that we felt would be useful “to people we care about,” the perception was that the literature review would not improve the report or the research in a way that would benefit those we were hoping to reach. It would not help to establish a conversation with either adults with little formal education or adult literacy practitioners. This orientation may be another example of the different relationship we think practitioners have with literature. We want to reach practitioners with our findings and we don't believe that a literature review is the best way to reach them.

Bonnie reflected on what she perceives to be the differences between academic and practitioner uses of the literature.

As a graduate student doing research, I am trained to situate myself within the current literature—to explain my position and stance, to display how my

research builds upon or challenges other research, and to show through the literature, how I've learned about my topic. In contrast, I saw how this group used their practice and their experience in that process. I watched and listened to how these literacy practitioners worked, how they talked about their work, learned from their work—and began to understand the ways they produce knowledge and situated themselves within that. (Bonnie, June 2002)

Throughout this project different types of speaking, writing, reading, and different ways of being were used for research, according to our roles as either practitioners or as graduate students. We gained experience and appreciation of the different kinds of literacy required in each of these kinds of research, learning to honour the different constructions of knowledge and to see that the context we work in affects and shapes the ways we produce knowledge.

In reflecting on the role the literature played on the project, Dee wrote:

Throughout the process I went back to my experience again and again to see/check/verify that what we were finding and writing rang true to what “I know” or thought “I knew”. I actually started to get to the point that I was getting quite arrogant in that I was sort of saying to myself “Yeah we captured that aspect too” and it truly amazed me how complete this project became. (Dee, June 2002)

Kate suggested:

I think practitioners use research about literacy learning when it resonates with what their experience is. Then they want concrete details about what the researchers do so they can apply it Monday morning. For example, I once read a study that showed that talking to students about taking responsibility for their work led to improved retention and progress. I thought, “Of course.” Then I wanted to know how they had talked to students, what readings they had used, how often, etc. so I could use it, without having to make it all up for my own students. However, the researchers did not include this information. They were interested in the fact that talking about responsibility produced greater responsibility. I was not surprised by that, was not interested in it, per se. I accepted the findings, and was interested in applying it to my practice. The literature was not useful in helping me to do this. (Kate, conversation, February 2002)

Based on our experience in this project, we propose that practitioners' knowledge is not necessarily framed by and in interaction with the current research literature on the field; rather it is mostly based in their experience. The four practitioners on the team each meet up to 50 adults with little formal education every year, spend hundreds of hours with them talking about their ways of learning, and teaching and learning with them. This experience-based knowledge is not rigorously codified or quantified, but it is real. It was this knowledge that led us to our involvement with the research question. It was this knowledge that allowed us to be successful at finding and interviewing participants, and it was this knowledge that confirmed our conclusions.

An incident occurred during our work that might highlight the different perspectives. We were discussing the authorship of the report, and Marina suggested that we might list our names alphabetically. The practitioners immediately responded that her name should go first, because she was the only person who could gain from having her name first. We all

recognized that publishing and being quoted in the literature was important for an academic, but for practitioners it was neither expected nor especially valued.

Traditionally, mostly in academic settings, the literature has been the stage for conversations about knowledge and knowledge production. A review of the literature would give a researcher a sense of what conversations are happening, what the field is producing in terms of content and in terms of methodology. If we understand practitioner knowledge and research approaches as not being solely based on and informing the literature, we are faced with important questions. Who is participating in the conversations that are happening in the literature? Who is not? Are conversations happening elsewhere? How does new knowledge build on previous knowledge if it not through the literature? How does new knowledge get incorporated into the field knowledge if it is not in academic writing?

The practitioners in this project entered a conversation in a field not previously represented in the literature. We are eager to share our findings with our colleagues, something that positioning ourselves in the current literature would not necessarily have done. Perhaps our attempt to use the literature is a reflection of the role that literature plays in practitioner research. We leave this question for other practitioners who, on hearing the music will lead their own dance rather than simply following the painted steps on the floor laid out by different researchers, for different audiences and different times.

Methodology

Within this chapter, we will identify the limitations of the data and the methodological issues that surfaced in the individual site descriptions. Throughout the project we worked collaboratively to decide which of our research methods would be common and where we would differ. We had specific methodology related to our collaboration, and this will be discussed in “Data Analysis 2: How do Practitioners do Collaborative Research?” We had face-to-face meetings and work sessions, and we discussed issues and questions over email and via teleconference.

We agreed to work with the same general participant group, and as a team decided who we wanted to interview. We each had our own design for contacting and arranging for participants appropriate to our communities. We discussed for a long time what our definition of “little formal education” should be. Our final decision was that participants would be:

- Adults age 19 or older
- Who had not completed Grade 12 or who had a modified Grade 12
- Who were not now participating in a learning program

We collaboratively designed one interview protocol. Although no two interviews were the same (as no two open-ended interviews ever are), much of the same content was covered at each site. There were some common questions including those related to going on a trip, finding information on a disease and identifying an area where the participant wanted to learn more. We taped the interviews and then took detailed notes from the tapes often marking areas of interest to look back at later. We then had a teleconference to discuss what had emerged from the data. We looked at the question of gender differences, but did not see any differences in terms of the kinds of strategies male and female participants chose. However, we noted that the usual gender and racial biases in our society applied to the lives of our participants, and we comment on these biases in the section on agency. Working from the data, we then determined key themes and coded those themes with numbers that we all used to mark our interviews. We each typed our participants’ comments in table form and coded our own data and then sent these tables, each several pages in length, to the rest of the team.

We then decided which team member would be responsible for which theme or themes. These decisions were based primarily on personal interest. Each of us read all the interviews from the other sites, and then read again for our themes those already coded and those still hidden in the data. At this point most of us had written a first draft and included some of the quotes we wanted to use. We circulated these drafts and each of us went back to our tapes for verbatim transcriptions for each quote that was present in this draft.

Circulating the drafts of our individual sections provided us with a good feel for where the entire project was headed and our individual data’s place in that progress. Team members provided honest and sometimes brutal feedback, “pushing” each other on content and analysis. This further increased the “ownership” of the entire project to the entire team.

Limitations of the Data

Literacy Levels

Participants were not screened for literacy skills. What we know is what they told us. While some participants said they were good readers with good comprehension skills, we do not know what types or level of material they were reading and referring to. Some participants referred to specific tests, as in “I have a Grade 10 education but tests rate me reading at university level.” Others told us they have no problem writing, yet others claimed to be terrible writers and spellers, as in “I do not spell. At all.” Their self-assessments may be skewed to either side of reality.

We did not pursue any kind of assessment, since our definition of “little formal education” resided in participants’ lack of regular Grade 12 completion, not their ability to read and write.

Interviewing: Response Accuracy

The data collection tool we chose, interviews, focuses on participants’ perceptions and experiences and that is what we captured. We had not anticipated determining accuracy of responses, as this would entail different data collection techniques. We were very pleased with the information people were willing to share with us and with the sincerity that they expressed in their answers. However, some of us wondered about the accuracy of some of the responses, mostly those related to the use of computers and libraries as learning resources. They seemed to be brought up as a learning strategy that could be used although the participants did not actually possess the skills to use them. For example, a participant might answer that if he wanted to learn something about diabetes, he would go to the library. However, if the answer was probed and he was asked if he had a library card and currently used the library, he would answer no. Therefore, what participants said they would do to learn something new and what they actually would do might in fact be different. We are not suggesting that the participants were “lying”—rather just that their ideas of what they would do to learn something and what they would actually do in order to learn something were different.

Transcriptions

Interviews were tape-recorded. We discussed the possibility of verbatim transcription. As we could not possibly imagine transcribing the conversations word by word because of the time and energy this would entail, we agreed to take accurate notes of the tapes.

A problem with this method arose later in the process. Researchers felt they should have gone back to the original tapes for complete quotes once they had identified themes and areas of focus. Everyone understood they would go back to the original tapes to accurately document specific quotes, but some felt they might have missed some good things, particularly in each other’s data. Then when they did return to the tapes they were reminded that what they had come to think of as quotes turned out to be only notes. While

they were rigorous notes, they were not transcriptions. Completing the transcriptions, even just for the quotes they would each be using, was again a tedious job.

As you continue to read the voices of the researchers will tell you their particular data collection strategies, where they differed from the others and where they were the same. We made many decisions about the project as a group. One decision was that Kate would be the first to work with the participants and we would all learn from her. Paula was next to jump in, using practice sessions to try to delve into the questions and the process. Then Darcy and Dee, having input from the others and their own explorations, collected their data. This section will follow that order and will use the voice of the individual researchers.

The Practitioners

Researcher: Kate Nonesuch

Site: Duncan

To collect my data I had planned to hold two workshops in the Reading and Writing Centre, which is a storefront program offering basic reading, writing and math. The Centre is part of the Career and Academic Preparation Program of Malaspina University-College, Cowichan Campus, in Duncan.

One of the motivations I had to get involved in this project was to work with my learners on a research project. Initially I had hoped to use current students in the research, and had planned to give them training so they could participate more in the research, rather than simply as group facilitators, which is the role they ended up having. I had thought of involving them in getting consent from participants, and of finding a way of collecting the data, such as having “stations,” staffed by students, that participants would visit to talk about a particular aspect of learning.

However, when I took my proposal to the Ethics Committee of the University-College, the Committee, while supportive of the research, had concerns about involving current students. First, they pointed out possible conflicts in my dual role as instructor and employer. Second, they were concerned that the students would be “co-investigators” and were not sure that they would be able to fully inform prospective participants about the study, risks and benefits of participation, voluntary withdrawal, etc. Third, that students were being asked to participate in something that was probably not properly part of the curriculum for their program, and I would need a letter of support from my dean on this issue.

While I thought I might be able to address some of the Ethics Committee’s concerns, I was not certain that I could address them all to their satisfaction, and furthermore, I did not think I had time to press the issue with the Committee. So I took their suggestion that I use former students rather than current students to answer their first concern. Once having decided to use former rather than current students, it was easy to decide to cut back on the kinds of participation I would ask them for. One of my goals had been to involve current students, give them some training in research methods, and use the research project as part

of the curriculum in my class. I did not have any such goals with former students. I decided they would be involved in inviting people to come to the sessions, acting as welcome committee to the sessions, doing a little facilitating in terms of getting the groups relaxed, and preparing snacks and coffee for the group sessions.

I prepared a list of former students who I might hire to work with me on the project. I went over class lists from the previous year, looking for a representative group that would be responsible workers. I looked for a mix of men and women, a variety of ethnicities and communities, and for people who would be willing to speak to their acquaintances. In June 2001 I hired five former students to work with me to invite participants to take part in a group session. The group was made up of five women, three First Nations, one with connections in the AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) community, a white Canadian and a recent immigrant from Iran.

During July 2001 student workers participated in two days of paid training. On the first day I ran the entire session that I planned to run with participants so the student workers would know exactly what was going to happen, and could explain it accurately to the people they were inviting to the session. The session I planned for participants included a group interview, and a choice of a one-on-one interview or making a collage on the subject of something they do well. As well, I introduced the topics of confidentiality and observation to the student workers. On the second day, we did some exercises in public speaking and observation, as well as assigning and practicing tasks such as introducing the researchers, leading the two warm-up activities, hosting, and preparing food. I reviewed confidentiality requirements and asked them who they thought would like to come and got their commitment to invite those people.

To collect data I conducted two group sessions (July 5 and July 10, 2001). Participants were invited to attend a two-and-a-half-hour group session with free coffee and snacks before the session started. I offered to pay \$20 for babysitting for anyone who needed a sitter in order to come to the session. To recruit participants, I prepared flyers a week in advance inviting people to come to either session. I gave copies of the flyers to the student workers and at the training sessions we talked about whom they would invite to the sessions. I went to the mall, to the Alano club (an alcohol and drug-free space for meetings and social activities), to a couple of grocery stores, and to the College, looking for people I knew who were connected with people with little formal education who were not in a program. (Many of the people I knew, of course, were in programs, but they are nearly all connected to family members not in programs.) I stopped people, talked about the project, asked them if they knew anybody who fit the criteria, and each one said they did, mentioning a sister or an adult child or a friend. The local press, as a result of a press release, interviewed me and a story appeared in the paper the day before the first session.

I felt as I usually do when I give a party—torn between thinking no one will come and being afraid that so many will come there won't be room for them all. From my journal:

I think we will be okay for participants. I have given out more than 50 flyers, and all the flyers have gone to people I know and was able to have a conversation with about the project. In any case, if the student workers bring in 3 people each, we would have 15 participants without any flyers, so who knows? We may have floods. (Kate's Journal July 2, 2001)

Group Session 1

Four people came, one recruited by my teaching partner, one who had signed up for classes but never attended, one the brother of a student worker, the other from the newspaper story. (The latter two both thought the session was a way of getting into classes at the Centre. See methodological issues below, “research considered part of the program.”) None of these people elected to do art; one had to leave early, and the other three chose to be interviewed one-on-one after the group session.

Group Session 2

Four people also showed up for the second group session. Two were former students that I had contacted (from at least three years ago and who had not completed the program). A training consultant who knew about the research project from me recruited one, and a student worker recruited the fourth at the swimming hole. Of these, one thought she could get into the program by coming to this session. From the group of four, two people elected to do art, and I debriefed them on tape after they had made their collages. A third was interviewed on tape and a fourth left early for personal reasons.

At the sessions, student workers did the food service, introduced me and the other interviewers there, and led two warm-up activities early in the meeting to get people comfortable. I described the project, went over the consent form, and conducted the group interview, which consisted of asking people how they would go about planning a trip, if they had won enough money to take them anywhere in the world.

After the group interview participants were offered a choice of making a collage or drawing, or being interviewed on tape, in answer to the question, “What is something you do well? Talk about how you learned to do it.” All one-to-one conversations and debriefing on artwork were tape-recorded. I promised I would bring back the results of the entire team’s research if I could contact them.

Feedback Session

When I started planning the feedback session, in April 2002, ten months after I had done the initial data collection, the phone numbers people had given me were generally out of service. Of the six people who were interviewed, four were no longer at the same numbers, and one had moved out of town. While I knew that some of them were still in Duncan because I sometimes ran into them, I didn’t have the energy to go look for them.

Methodological Issues

Difficulty in Recruiting Participants

All members of the research team thought it would be easy to find people with little formal education who would be willing to participate in the research. This proved not to be the case at my site. I was hoping for eight to twelve participants at each of two sessions. I got four people at each session, and since one person left early from each session, the only data I have for them came from the group interview.

At our initial team meeting (February 2001) we discussed the definition of “little formal education” and, although we considered using “less than Grade 9” as a cut-off point, we

finally decided to use “did not finish Grade 12 or having a modified Grade 12, and not currently in a program.” I made a major error in producing the flyers I used to recruit participants. I had relied on my memory, rather than going back to the minutes and checking to see what criteria we had agreed on. The flyers asked for participants who had not finished Grade 9. This turned out to be a huge difficulty when student workers invited people to participate. As one student worker reported, “They turned and ran, when I said I needed people with less than Grade 9.” Had I used the agreed upon criteria, I might have got more participants.

Of the eight people who came, only two came through the student workers. Student workers talked about what they had done to recruit participants:

- One worker volunteers at the Alano Club and handed out flyers and talked to people there.
- One worker took her kids to the pool and to the river to swim, and talked and handed out flyers to other people there. One person came as a result of this work.
- One worker handed out flyers in her building, sometimes talking to people, sometimes just putting out the flyers. After the first session, she gave flyers to her husband to hand out at work.
- One woman has a huge social network that consists of smoking and having coffee in various public places in Duncan. (She lives out of town, and comes by bus, which always means she spends an hour or two waiting around at both ends of her day.) She talked with and handed out flyers to many people. She was interested in the project, “honoured” that we would be interested in folks who learn differently and who have a different kind of life.
- One worker comes from a family deeply connected with traditional First Nations culture. I know her sister and two brothers, her mother and her father. When I asked her if her sister would come, she said no, quick shake of the head, don’t ask me any more. When I asked if her mother would come (her father is not well), she first said maybe, then half an hour later said it would be too hot for her. Her brother came to pick her up after the training sessions, and I talked to him about coming to the research sessions. He came to the first session. I’m not sure if the worker recruited him, or if I did.

Research Considered Part of the Program

Three participants came to the research sessions looking for information about enrolling in the classes given at the Centre. One, a former student, regarded this session as part of the program (although it was in July when the Centre is closed). Since it was at the Reading and Writing Centre, led by me, and a group session, and since most participants were recruited through their contact with me, it seems likely that they would view the research as part of the program. This may have intensified the difficulty we had in recruiting participants. After the sessions, I discussed the difficulty with Evelyn Battell, an instructor with years of experience teaching fundamentals students.

In hindsight, she didn’t think it would ever work that students would recruit other people. She reminded me of how often our students try to get family members to come to school. Either they won’t have anything to do with it, or they are dragged in, sign up and drop out immediately. New students sometimes come

in pairs, where it is obvious one of them is the driving force. Both sign up, but the second one only comes briefly. It seems as if the one who wants to come can't come without some support, so brings the support person under duress. If the research is connected closely with the Centre's programming, it makes sense that people would be equally reluctant to come in to take part in the research. (Kate's Journal, July 16, 2001)

Reflecting, it also seems to me that had I used current students, the problem with the research being identified with the program would have been even greater.

Researcher: Paula Davies

Site: Prince George

For my methodology I chose to interview adults with little formal education to try to discover how they learn the things they want to know. I felt that I would be able to find people to interview by going through students currently in the upgrading department at the college where I work (the College of New Caledonia). Before actually conducting the interviews, I wanted to hear responses on how people learn from upgrading students who I already knew. While our research question was to look at how people with little formal education who are not in programs learned, I needed to familiarize myself with the research question and possible responses before I conducted the actual interviews. To do this, I worked with students who were currently in my English 030 classes (approximately at the Grade 10 level). The other students I worked with were in an upgrading English 020 class (approximately at the Grade 5-8 level).

With the two classes of English 030 students, I asked them to write a response to the prompt:

When I want to learn something new I...

I then read through these responses to see if there were common themes. In the English 020 class, I facilitated a class discussion around the question of what the students do when they want to learn something new.

While the project's research question did not encompass a comparison between how our target group and others learn, I found myself needing to reflect on just how anybody learned anything in order to situate the responses I would get from the actual interviews. To this end, I asked myself how I thought each of my four children (ages 21, 19, 15, 15) learned things that they wanted to know. I wrote a description of the strategies I thought each of them would use.

Finally, several months prior to conducting the actual interviews, I did trial interviews using our research questions with several of my upgrading students. This process and the results of the mock interviews were discussed with Marina. She provided valuable suggestions to enhance the quality of my interviewing techniques. The suggestions mainly focused on the issue of probing interviewee responses to get more detail and depth from their answers.

I now felt ready to proceed with identifying participants for the research. I first presented a description of the research project to the instructors in the upgrading department where I teach. After the brief presentation, I requested permission to drop into the fundamental

Math and English classes and explain the research project to the students. I would then ask these students if they had friends, acquaintances or family members who met the criteria. My colleagues welcomed me into their classrooms. Over the next week I visited several classes, made my presentation, left my request and then returned several days later to see if any of the students had been able to find willing participants for me to interview. The phone numbers of eight adults who met the criteria and were willing to be interviewed were provided. I was happy with this response and comfortable phoning each of these people because I knew that they had had the project described to them by someone they trusted and that they had already agreed to participate. I was offering a \$20 honorarium to each person I interviewed and they knew this at the time they volunteered to participate.

Over the space of several weeks I called and arranged one-on-one interviews with each of the participants. Some of these interviews took place in my office at the college and some occurred in the participants' homes. The location was the interviewee's choice. The interviews took between 45 minutes and an hour and a half. They were tape recorded with the participants' permission. I later listened to the tapes and took detailed notes of the conversations.

Methodological Issues

Monetary Recognition for Participant Time

During the course of this research project I became aware of several methodological problems with the work I had done. First of all, I had concerns about the \$20 honorarium I paid to the people that I interviewed. I used an honorarium principally to recognize the time and information that participants were contributing to this research. However, I did feel extremely uncomfortable during the actual exchange. I felt like some kind of imperialist, taking what I wanted and leaving token trinkets. I am not sure how this could have been handled more satisfactorily.¹⁰

Definitions of "Little Formal Education" and my Particular Interest

Another methodological issue for me concerned the actual people I was able to interview. While our research question identified anyone without a Grade 12 certificate as meeting our criteria, I was personally interested in focusing on those adults who only got as far as Grade 9 in school. However, when it came time to inquire about formal education, I found I was not able to ask for participants with less than Grade 9. It seemed okay for me to ask for participants with less than a Grade 12 education, but it did not "feel" appropriate to ask if their formal education only went as far as Grade 9. While some of the people I interviewed did only have a Grade 9 education, I was not able to interview only those participants.

¹⁰ One participant turned down the honorarium stating that he didn't need the money. In order to acknowledge his contribution he was asked if he would like the honorarium donated in his name to a community group. One was chosen and the donation made.

Researcher: Darcy Allen

Site: Prince George

I chose to interview adults with little formal education individually and in a group session to try to discover how they learn the things they want to know. Prior to meeting with participants, I did two practice interviews—one with my partner and one with a former adult literacy student. In the beginning I had no doubt that I would be able to get at least ten volunteers to participate in my interviews. I felt that as I knew so many people and they knew me, of course they would want to participate. What I failed to realize was that the people I needed to interview have genuine fears about education, learning, and teachers. To them I am a teacher, even in my role as researcher.

I struggled with how I was going to convince people to participate and had to re-evaluate the number of interviews I was going to be able to complete. Would I use those who were referred by their social assistance caseworker? Should I hold out hope for friends and family members of my literacy learners? Could I ask potential participants in my literacy tutor program? After much debate within myself and with guidance from my teammates, I was able to interview people who came to me via friends of past students and other programs within the Friendship Centre and my own friends' family members. Five participants were identified. Now, I still had to actually meet with them.

The reality though is that those first few tries were a mess. One person didn't show up three times, while another didn't show once but phoned to cancel once also. Another person never did show up. Six times I was stood up or prepared to meet and got a last minute phone call to cancel. After the sixth inconvenience I met two interviewees in their own homes. I understand now that it was much easier for them to have these intimate conversations in the safety of their own homes and on their own time. The other three did come to meet me after I told them about the \$20 honorarium. All interviews were audio taped and all of the participants signed letters of consent for my use of their information and names in this project. Each participant was given a \$20 honorarium at the end of the interview. I did feel a little odd paying people for this, but I was able to explain that I had budgeted for this payment and that I truly appreciated their time. Each participant expressed thanks for both my taking time to learn about them and for the money.

Only three of the five participants were willing to attend the group session that was presented as an informal opportunity to share their ideas about learning and education with the other people I had interviewed. At the group session I provided pizza, pop, and another \$20 honorarium as incentives and we managed to meet over the lunch hour. In retrospect, the incentives did little to afford confidence to the two people who needed the safety of their own homes for the individual interviews. After each interview and the group session, I drafted notes and recorded answers as I listened to the tapes for the first time. I later had to go back to the tapes at least twice more to get exact quotes. A proper transcription of these tapes would have been worthwhile but not within the budget of this project.

Methodological Issues

Recruiting Participants

I have been working in the downtown core for many years and know many people who qualify for participation in this project, and I have established a good rapport with many of them. I thought that people would be overjoyed to help me out with this project by allowing me to interview them. I was wrong. I set up several meetings that would prove to be no shows before I was finally able to get five participants for individual interviews and three participants to attend a group session.

Dealing with Employment Issues

When I began in this project in January 2001 it was with the support of my employer, the Prince George Native Friendship Centre. My employer was willing to give me release time to work on the project. I worked in the downtown core of Prince George and I would have continuing contact with the very group of people I was hoping to interview. Unfortunately, the funding for my job ended in March and I was forced to leave the Friendship Centre that was still willing to support me by providing me with an office, computer, and other “in kind” resources they had promised in our project agreement. I then went immediately to work for another not-for-profit organization on a part-time basis so that I could continue to have time for this project. This part-time job had been enjoyable and convenient, but was not going to get me to my career goal, so I left at the end of June.

I knew who I wanted to interview for the research project, but with my work life in a spin. I had done little other than read other people’s research. My original intent was to have done several interviews by the end of June, and I was already behind. I did manage to get all of my data collected in October before I was ready to look for other work. On November 1st I started a new job and one I really wanted. I took on a full time teaching position at an inner city elementary school where I am now responsible for all of the Learning Assistance, Support, and ESL (English as a Second Language). As I began this job I had a huge amount of work as it was well into the school year, a strike was looming, and I needed to make this job fit me. My research became a late night activity, which affected the time and energy I could dedicate to the project.

Dealing with Personal Life Issues

While not strictly methodological issues, throughout the time this project occurred, being laid off, looking for employment, two kids, undergoing major surgery, and starting a new job were all personal issues that I had to face. I think this was the most change that I have had to go through in one year. Thank goodness for the opportunity to travel with the rest of our team to our face-to-face meetings. That was the time that I could be rejuvenated and feel excited about this project again.

Researcher: Dee McRae

Site: Houston/Smithers

Like the others, I chose to interview participants and I audiotaped the conversations. Our interviews were very similar and ran from 45 minutes to over two hours.

One place we differed was in our way of finding participants. As Kate, in Duncan, had been the first to try to attract participants, we had talked with her and we were aware that the mass-media campaign (news story, posters and several people chatting up the research) had not brought in the huge numbers we had all expected.

I decided to talk to people I knew of (not people I knew directly) and friends of friends. I did not offer any money to the participants. Seven people were identified and contacted in the Houston/Smithers research area. Kate Nesbitt, who is the Learner Friend for the project was originally going to do some of the interviews. (See page 71 for more on the role of the Learner Friend in this project.¹¹) Two of the potential participants were unavailable (out of the area for the time period of the interviews) and two failed to be interviewed (one due to personal problems and one did not show up at the arranged time and did not reschedule). Another participant did not show up for the first meeting but did make the second meeting.

To practice my interview skills and to consider the questions more fully, Kate Nesbitt and I went through a practice interview. This assisted me in refining my questions and it also directed her for the journaling portion of this project. Three interviews were done in the area. Two took place at The Learning Centre in Houston and the other in the participant's home. Two of the interviews were extensive, lasting two hours. Time constraints due to other jobs, tape transcriptions and collaborative team deadlines made it difficult to arrange more interviews.

I found this way of contacting participants productive because we found in them another voice. This group was interested in participating and committed to assisting in the research project. They knew well ahead of the actual interview about the research and the sorts of things I would be asking them. They had thought about how they learned and considered their responses during and prior to the interview. Two of the participants said that since they knew I was going to be interviewing them they had observed how they learned new material so had already done some analysis when it came time for the interview. One participant did a great deal of analysing as the interview progressed. All of the participants were committed to doing the interview, no matter how much time it took.

¹¹ The term Learner Friend is an evolution from that of Research Friend that has been used to describe Marina Niks' role with the community of Adult Literacy/ABE practitioners in British Columbia since 1999. This work of the Research Friend has been made possible by a grant from the federal-provincial Adult Literacy Cost-Shared Program.

Methodological Issues

Recruitment

Though we shared common criteria for identifying who the project participants would be, we each had different methods of recruitment and to some extent different interests in whom we wanted to talk to. We each had experience with the diverse group who are adults with little formal education and each of us had different targets, if you will, related to our practice and our communities. Paula and Kate were most interested in participants with a Grade 9 or less, and Darcy in the people living and operating around the Friendship Centre. I wanted to talk to those with little formal education who had found other ways to find success. We did not each talk only to our target group, but having our personal interest did affect how we went about finding participants.

My method of asking friends to refer people who they knew gave me a different group of participants. At first I felt I was skipping the point by not seeking the marginalized adults with little formal education, but I felt we needed and wanted a cross-section of the group and the successful non-marginalized adults had lots to tell us as well. These successful individuals also appear in the data from other interviewers. I know several other people with little formal education whom I could have interviewed, who are competent, successful, and highly skilled. However, I purposely avoided interviewing people I knew directly, simply due to my perception of their comfort.

Sharing Data

Often we found ourselves more comfortable with our own interviews, because no matter how much we read the other data, it was simply not as alive as that from the interviews we had conducted and taken notes on ourselves. We did develop knowledge of the other participants, and created our own pictures of them. I could usually identify the quotations of other participants, but I would guess that my mental picture, gained through the study of the notes from their interviews, is not reflected in reality.

I feel the sharing of the data was a strong point for this project and tied us together in a way that would have not been possible otherwise. It was so exciting to see examples of my themes in the other site's data, and conversely for the other researchers to tell me when I had missed something in my own interviews. Similarly, hearing one of the team say that one of my quotations was perfect for a point they were trying to make helped to carry the collaboration throughout the project.

Learner Involvement

There are a multitude of issues around learner involvement in projects like this. One that I feel strongly about concerns creating opportunities for learners to use their expertise where they can. They are accustomed to not being experts, to not holding knowledge and if we can allow them places and projects where they hold the knowledge, we all gain. Kate Nesbitt was my expert learner and in that capacity taught me a great deal and taught herself too.

Geographic Location

At the start of this project, we all felt geographic location likely to be of importance to this study.¹² For any of you who attended our presentation at the Gathering in Edmonton in July 2001, you will recall we had quite a bit of fun with our geographic diversity. Then, suddenly, about six months later, I recall saying to the team, “Have you noticed we haven’t mentioned anything about where people live in terms of how they learn?” The issue of the distinct geographic locations we were each coming from never emerged as a significant factor in our research.

In the responses we collected from participants nothing stood out. Prince George is the largest centre in the study (population approx. 80,000), then Duncan (approx. 5,000) and then Houston (approx. 4,500). Perhaps our responses reflect adult learners in small town BC, for to many, Prince George retains a small town feel. On the other hand, perhaps geography is not a significant factor and, while we suspect the latter, it is an issue that may deserve further analysis.

¹² The research sites were in Duncan, Prince George (two sites) and Houston/Smithers.

Data Analysis 1: How do Adults with Little Formal Education Learn?

This chapter presents an analysis of the data from the individual and group interviews with the research participants. After we had conducted all the interviews, each of us took rigorous notes from our tapes. These notes were circulated among the research team. At the subsequent face-to-face meeting, we identified the various themes that we saw emerging from the data. These themes were then combined and further analysed. Each of us then took responsibility for one of the themes that we were particularly interested in. We returned to our own communities throughout the province and began the next step of the data analysis. Each of us re-read all of the notes from all of the interviews, paying particular attention to the theme we had committed to analysing. The four themes that we investigated are:

- 1) Learning Strategies
- 2) Life Experiences
- 3) Agency
- 4) Emotions

The more we discussed and debated what each of us were discovering about our themes, the more we saw how interconnected each theme was. We discovered the rich and complex set of relationships among the four themes to be a useful set of tools for understanding how adults with little formal education learn.

The material in this chapter outlines what we learned about each of the four themes.

Learning Strategies

This section explores how the participants in this project told us they learn and the ways in which they most often chose to learn the things they have learned. The adults with little formal education whom we interviewed learn both new skills and new knowledge. They named five main strategies they use:

- Ask
- Read
- Observe/Model
- Just Do It
- Use Technology

The following table depicts the strategies that were most frequently discussed by the participants who we interviewed.

Table 1: Learning Strategies of Adults With Little Formal Education in this Study

Learning Strategy	Total # of Occurrences ¹³
Ask	164
Read	90
Observe/Model	56
Just Do It	54
Use Technology	47

Strategy 1: Ask

Participants in this study use asking as a learning strategy in many ways and for many purposes. We sometimes fail to understand how often the participants depend upon others for information. For some of the people we interviewed, it is commonplace to seek information from friends or family members who they perceive to be “smarter” than they are.

Shawnene:¹⁴ I learn the most from my mom and my sister even though she is younger than me. If I need something read, my mom reads it. If she isn't here, my sister reads it for me... I ask my mom how to do things I don't know how to do. I'm not very comfortable asking people I don't know.

David: So you are asking me about learning. Like, I learn from my sister. I go to her for information. Like this project, I didn't really understand it, so I kept asking her. I asked her about what's going on today. Do I have to do any signing? Do I have to do any reading? Like I'm not really good at that.

When asked about how she learned about cancer when her mom was first diagnosed, Shawnene replied:

Shawnene: My mom brought home some information and she read it to me.

Some responses pointed out a dependency upon their family and friends. Bruce explains how he managed to get his pilot's license even though his literacy skills are very low:

Bruce: I brought my wife to ground school. She would help me with the reading and definitions. My hands-on skills have always been good. When the instructor was talking, if he said something I didn't understand, I didn't feel ignorant asking my wife. My wife would also take notes for me and ask questions in class.

At another level, many of the participants in the interviews shared that they most often ask the person who they consider to be the expert about a topic that they are seeking information about. David tells us how he learned about some traditional First Nations medicinal plants.

¹³ Each time participants named a strategy they used to learn something; we counted it as one occurrence. Sometimes the reference to the strategy was only one sentence and other times it was a paragraph.

¹⁴ Throughout the text pseudonyms have been used to identify participants unless they requested otherwise. Biographic details of all participants are in Appendix 2.

David: And like, for cancer for example, there is stuff out in the woods, Mother Nature or Nature's course or something. The Elders would say, well, go out and get so and so from the bushes. There's a lot of branches out there, medicine what they call it, besides taking what the doctors give. They say get the bark off a certain tree and this will cure you. It's um... Most of them use bark today, from the trees like red cedar. Some would dig it out from the ground and they would boil it or eat it, just to better themselves or get rid of it. What the catch is, you got to believe in this stuff; it works. If you don't believe in it, it's not going to do any good to you.

Interviewer: What about you? Do you believe in that?

David: I do believe in my culture. We are First Nations people. I believe whatever has been told to me, or what's been said to me.

Anita talks about how she would go about learning about a newly diagnosed illness.

Anita: [Go to] a Health Unit and see if you could get information about it... Go to the front desk, tell them you have someone with diabetes and I would like some pamphlets, some information. If the pamphlets are full of big words, I'd go to talk to somebody... your doctor or physician or go to a library... go ask a librarian to point me in the direction of books on diabetes.

Pat looks for the person who has the information:

Pat: I'll ask the person who I know has the information. Like the lady who runs the fax machine, I asked her how to send a fax because she has that skill.

Although not used as frequently as "ask" as a learning strategy, the following additional strategies occurred often enough throughout the interviews to warrant mention.

Strategy 2: Read

The second most often mentioned learning strategy among the adults with little formal education that we interviewed involves reading and books. This is the strategy of choice for many, both to learn skills and to gather knowledge. Although Judy reads all kinds of books ranging from cookbooks to books about medical issues and faraway lands, reading isn't her preferred choice for learning about something new.

Judy: I can learn stuff like crafts out of a book but I prefer to have the person there to work with me.

Pat shares that she prefers books for learning:

Pat: I'm always interested in different things. I just immerse myself in that thing totally. I'll have a whole stack of books and encyclopaedias next to me. I love to learn from them.

Another way those we interviewed mentioned reading was in the context of having someone else read the information and then share their interpretation of that material with them.

Shawnene: I surf the Net, but my mom has to be sitting with me. She reads it to me when I don't know the words.

Strategy 3: Observe/Model

To learn by watching others is the strategy of choice for learning skills like fly-fishing, knitting, and using a computer. Doug tells us about learning to spay cast:

Doug: I'll skip ahead to fishing. This is a physical thing so there is a lot of physical—I've been learning how to spay cast the last few years. It is a different system of fly-fishing; you use a 14-foot fly rod you have to control the line in the air and it is very difficult. So what I'll do is I'll go down to the river and sort of fish in behind somebody who can spay cast. And I look and I can copy. But that is a physical skill, sort of training the body to remember something.

Ann shares her experience in learning how to prepare wool for knitting:

Ann: I was five when I started that. In that time we lived in a one-room house. There would be like 15 of us—like my mother, my dad, aunties and uncles, my grandparents... they taught us very young. We all like, we all worked in groups outside the home. How we heated up the water, outside, over an open fire. We had big tubs like that; three tubs, sudsy water, another mild, rinsing water.

Interviewer: Did you know why three tubs?

Ann: To clean the wool.

Interviewer: What did the adults talk about while they were knitting?

Ann: The adults—we never really listened to their conversation. We were always busy. Like, I could say, in our teachings we were not allowed to speak unless spoken to, that's how we were taught.

About learning to carve, David says:

Interviewer: Can you tell me who you watched?

David: His name is Cowboy.

Interviewer: You watched one person?

David: One person. Or my older brother, he carved all his life, that's pretty well it, or my uncle, he's a pretty good carver. All these carvers, to me I consider them good people, like masterpiece carvers, you can say. Their carvings come out really nice, they sell their carvings all over, BC, Japan. That's where most of them go. The most I watched was Cowboy... He taught me a lot, how to carve, how to hold the knife, and the piece of wood, cedar, he's the one who showed me how to hold it, and start carving it, drawing it out and sketching it. He said, just take your time, just put your mind on it and it will turn out the way you want it.

Several of the people who we interviewed frequently mentioned that they preferred to have a person who has the skill they want to learn nearby. As they discussed in a group session, they like to watch that “expert” and have that person available for questions.

Judy: Yes, I needed to have [her] there when I was learning the computer.

Penny: Yeah somebody nearby.

Judy: Now I'm over that fear—I can go on it and do it myself.

Some of the participants mentioned the people as role models as a way to learn to behave especially for those who mentioned their relationship with drugs and alcohol.

Judy: Being around people who have self-confidence helps me feel more confident. Being around people like my sister and you has helped me a lot. I cannot hang around people with addictions anymore—it's not good for me.

Pat: I read books to stay positive... be around positive people like those at the women's shelter. I know I'm not perfect, that I still have to better myself.

When he tells about learning to play slow pitch, David shares that his experience was based solely upon observation and trial and error:

David: I learned just by watching. My sister played for a while and I messed around with it, throwing the ball, batting the ball, with her. I'd just watch. I've been playing the last two years now. Just by watching the other people, how they did it, so I followed what they done.

Bruce tells how he would like to learn more about computers:

Bruce: Because I wasn't educated, I don't know how to study. I'm a hands-on person. I have to watch people—see what they're doing—at my own pace. I have to stand back and watch then get physically involved in it—at my own pace.

Strategy 4: Just Do It

This strategy is not uncommon. Many interviewees suggested that they would rather just do it—give it a try—than risk asking someone.

Pat: ...sometimes I feel stupid to ask so I just try it.

Others suggested that they just go ahead and do things on their own, a strategy that gets results with no need to rely on other people or other, possibly problematic, strategies.

Anita: Just being from foster home to foster home. How you know you have to work well with them. If you don't, you move... [I learned to cook] through the families. I was with foster families. We took turns cooking with the parents... being in the kitchen... cooking with them.

Marie: I like to do it myself. For example, I don't want to go to a travel agent and say, "Send me to this place and make all the arrangements." I want to do that all myself. I want to know that it is all taken care of. I just want to do it. I gather the information I need and fill in the forms. We're in the process now of doing that actually.

Harold talks often about learning on the job or while he is doing a particular task.

Harold: Ah, it was on a soup line [that I learned to cook] All the, how would I put it? All the underprivileged people who could barely afford—they'd just come there and have dinner.

When asked how she learned to sew, Cynthia replies:

Cynthia: Just did it... Trial and error... You have to read with sewing. A lot of times I made up my own pattern, did my own design... pick it out if you have to. I'm a perfectionist.

Pat learned how to french braid when she saw someone's braid.

Pat: I noticed someone's braid and just practiced a lot at home. It took about a month and I had it.

Karen talks about how she would pack for a holiday to a place she's never been to.

Interviewer: How would you find out what clothing to take?

Karen: Um just bring a little bit of everything.

Interviewer: OK. So in other words you are pretty keen to just do it. You don't really think you need a lot of information before you do something.

Karen: I guess not. Well you could always ask your travel agency what the weather is like at this time of year and they would probably know.

Strategy 5: Use Technology

Using electronic technology as a learning strategy is mentioned often throughout the interviews. However, as mentioned earlier, it is unknown whether the participants actually have the skills to use the resources they mentioned. The use of the Internet as a source of information is a very popular and socially acceptable answer, and one that is given often by people who claim to have few if any computer skills. Penny, for instance, expresses a desire to find out information about Osama Bin Laden. She tells us that she would get the information from the library and from the computer, but she also shares that she is not a very good reader and doesn't know how to use a computer. The following discussion took place during a group session.

Penny: I'd go to the library, books, computer.

Interviewer: Do you know how to use the Internet?

Penny: Um, no, not really.

Interviewer: What skill do you think you need?

Penny: [I] would like to read better to keep my brain going.

Interviewer: Do you have trouble understanding what you read?

Penny: Sometimes.

We also met people who are determined to refuse to use technology. Marie expresses a dislike of both the telephone and the computer:

Marie: If the information wasn't in the library I would get on the telephone. It is all in the yellow or blue pages whatever you want. Now I'd use the telephone, which also makes me crazy because it is automated. I am always pushing zero—just skip it and go right to zero. I just want to talk to somebody.

Marie: I keep thinking I know it is on Internet somewhere but that would require me going upstairs and turning the machine on and I'm not going to do it... We read on the passport forms that we can do it on the computer. You can fill in your application and give them your VISA number and away it goes. I don't know what they do about the picture or maybe you can print it up once it is filled in—I don't know. I didn't even bother to go and look. I've got a pen.

We did interview people who do use the computer in appropriate ways and with confidence. Brent took a short computer course and works with computers on a regular basis for his job.

Brent: I've learned lots of stuff from surfing the Net and using the HELP files. If I don't understand something at all, I go to people with the knowledge. If I have some understanding, I go to the computer.

Other technological sources of information include TV and radio. These two media seem to be reserved mostly for learning things like cooking and for gathering additional knowledge just for the sake of interest rather than need.

Pat: I just love to watch the documentaries. I've learned about lots of different animals and famous people and people I didn't even know were famous until I watched about them on a documentary. I watched all of the news specials about the terrorists and I learned a lot about it and about the religions and stuff.

Penny: Yeah, I've made stuff [food] that they show on those [TV] shows. It's easy.

News specials and newscasts are often the sources of information about current events for many of the people we interviewed.

Interviewer: Is there any information that you need on a regular basis, for example the weather?

Karen: No, not really—I watch the news though but I hear the weather on radio all the time so but it is not something I would check up on everyday just to know, like if I hear it then that is great but if I don't then it doesn't bother me.

Interviewer: So you get your news mostly from the TV?

Karen: Uh huh. I watch 11 o'clock news almost every night. BCTV world news. It has everything on it. I don't usually watch the news from Terracel probably should but I don't.

Interviewer: You probably learn quite a bit about world events and things and keep up to date on news?

Karen: Uh huh. I don't really keep up to date. I just kind of watch it like and if something is going on I'll know a little bit about it but I don't know like everything about it like how it started or what's going on since ...some, most nights I fall asleep half way through anyway so...

Pat: I watch the news highlights at night and some of those news specials. That's mostly how I learn about what's going on in the world.

When Janet describes how she would go about planning a trip she says:

Janet: Well, I've seen on TV, on Alex's Best, they have travelling. They've had some pretty good prices on places to go. I'd have to look at prices, airfares. I'd like to go on a cruise... It's on BCTV... There's a 1-800 number that I could phone... I would think they would give more information.

Conclusion

It is obvious that in this research “ask” is the learning strategy participants used overwhelmingly. Significant use is also made of reading, observing or modeling, just doing it, and electronic technology. While attempting to identify and document the use of these strategies by adults with little formal education, numerous other significant issues were raised by the adults we interviewed. These issues were combined in the theme “life experiences.”

Life Experiences

When we asked adults with little formal education how they learned, they described different strategies they would use to learn different things. The strategies participants chose related to what they were learning, their skill level, their overall “comfort” with a strategy and their previous success with a particular strategy. As the participants talked they often told us stories related to learning and how their experiences related to how they learn now.

While these stories were interesting and often provided us with a more complete picture of the participants’ learning, at first we did not recognize what part they would play in the final project. Eventually, as the data analysis progressed, we understood that through their stories participants were identifying for us some issues related to their learning strategies, something we would need in order to fully describe how they learn. All of the interviews had some reference to life experiences. Some of the participants were consciously using these stories to analyse “why” they learn the way they do.

We called these references or stories “life experiences.” The majority of these life experiences fell in the pre-adult or “growing up years.” The growing up years’ experiences proved to have a powerful impact on learning in both negative and positive ways. Sometimes it was the family who made an impact in the lives and learning of participants and other times it was an outsider; an employer, teacher or stranger. The participants felt acknowledged, challenged, understood and appreciated by these individuals in the positive learning experiences and traumatized, intimidated or abused in the negative ones. Positive experiences were also referred to when we asked about the characteristics of a good teacher and negative experiences were often also brought up related to examples of what a good teacher should never do. Other experiences were not directly related to relationships, but rather to a place or time where the participants were allowed to learn on their own terms or, in the negative instances, were not challenged or given options to fully explore their learning and use the strategies that worked.

In considering the life experiences related to how participants learn, we identified four specific groupings:

- Stressors—events or conditions which created physical or emotional stress (traumas, abuse, poverty)
- Learning Culture of the Family, Community and School

- The Leaving School Experience—why they did not continue on to finish high school
- Work Experiences—the learning culture of the first few jobs and the importance of those jobs

Stressors

We found that many of the participants in our study had had some form of negative life experience including traumas, abuse or poverty. We have grouped these negative life experiences as “stressors,” that is events and conditions that caused stress. In our original questions we did not ask, “Have you ever experienced a traumatic event that you feel affected your learning?” Or “Did the amount of money your family had in any way affect your learning?” Or “Do you think the fact you are Native made a difference in your educational experience?” And yet, references to these events and circumstances do occur in our data. Participants brought them to the surface, as they reflected on their learning, without being specifically asked. For many participants early experiences may have been what caused them not to finish school, not to return to learning, or not to feel themselves successful. Participants indicated there may have been a connection between the stress and their own learning, not just at the time of the event but long after. However, we did not probe these areas for further references, and generally the references in the data were shallow. In some cases the interviewer knew the story of abuse that was being referred to, but it does not appear as a documented part of the data. At the same time this is an important part of the study and to not document what emerged unsolicited, would be a significant omission.

Harold is a First Nations person and when we interviewed him we felt he was doing his best not to get too down on whites. We felt that he politely tiptoed around the racism issue, but that he felt certain that his opportunities in life, specifically work and educational opportunities, were related to the fact that he is a First Nations person.

Harold: Okay, there are lots of issues around the world. To me, some people see it as they just want it to go their way but there are people that want, that have to have their own opinion that involves everybody not just one person, one language, one colour. I think it is wrong. I think everybody should pull together and decide what should be done to help the lesser—those with lower education and lower esteem receive what they want... And it's not the coloured people that are stopping me. It's the people that are—white.

Other First Nations participants did not bring up racism directly, but when we see how careful Harold is, perhaps we can see why they did not. After all, they are talking to middle class white females. Not only is there an obvious power imbalance, but also how could we, as complete strangers, be trusted to empathize? We did not ask about race and if it had an effect on how they learn so it may have been a double risk for a First Nations person to talk to us, white people, about racism when they were asked to talk about learning.

The implications of this phenomenon are broader than this research project. The majority of people working in the helping professions: librarians, social workers, educational advisors, counsellors and teachers across Canada are middle-class white females. How

comfortable would Harold be laying out his fears, concerns or inabilities for “us” or “them” to see? And consequently, have Harold’s life experiences related to racism limited his options for learning? Has his dependency on a system that is “inaccessible” to him acted as an additional stressor in his life?

When asked how they learned, participants spoke unsolicited about abuse in its many forms and how events in their lives had affected how they learned now as adults. They spoke of childhood sexual abuse, teen and adult drug and alcohol abuse, and spousal abuse. They also referred to mental abuse coming from people close to them with constant repetition, or from strangers or co-workers at random. Many of the participants discussed more than one type of abuse or used the term generally to cover all of the terrible things that were happening to them and the strategy (drugs) they used to bury the memories of other forms of abuse.

As Cynthia tells us, her childhood abuse and later spousal abuse led to a breakdown in adulthood that prevented her from working.

Cynthia: I ended up having a severe nervous breakdown though [tells about childhood abuse and marital abuse]. I couldn't work anymore. My self-esteem was so low. They say that every time bad happens you push it all into the back. Well, working full-time and raising a child brought everything forward. The problems that I had pushed to the back came out. I was diagnosed as bipolar.

She tells of how she was given prescription drugs for her condition and how these interfered with her learning. At the time, she was also dealing with her daughter’s drug abuse.

Cynthia: When I was taking my Special Needs [training], I was really having a lot of problems... because of the medication I was taking for my bipolar... I was having difficulty comprehending everything that was going down. My daughter was 15. She was going into drugs, drinking and partying and running away from home. I had to quit too because of that.

For Cynthia, her attendance in a program is affected both by her daughter’s drug abuse and her own prescriptions. She does not tell us if her prescriptions made it hard for her to attend physically or mentally but drugs can interfere in both ways. Was she unable to drop off to sleep until 5:00 a.m., so therefore not able to be in class at 8:30 a.m.? Or did she find her mind so fogged or muddled by her prescription drugs that she could not mentally keep up? Either way, she could not learn at school due to her multiple abuse issues.

Unfortunately for Harold, the adverse affects of alcohol on the fetus were not well known when he was conceived. He tells us that it was one of the factors affecting his learning and his own alcohol abuse.

Harold: It's what happens before you start learning. You've got to complete your brain. Your brain has to be developed to understand and learn. At that time, something would stop it. Like when I was small, I was taken away—a slow learner baby. That's how I was... If there is interference with any foreign substance stopping the brain from growing, completing, then he's going to have a hard time learning. I had a problem with alcohol—when you're inside your Mom's stomach. That's part of what's my disability with learning. This is going back to before alcohol was even brought to this country. We didn't have a hard time learning and then somebody came and brought the alcohol.

The most direct reference to sexual abuse and learning comes from Shawnene. It is evident that she was a child trying to deal with enormous hurts that were interfering with her schooling.

Shawnene: I've been walking out of classes since Grade 2. I don't know how many times... I threw the desk at the teacher I was getting so frustrated. In Grade 12 the principal told me in front of my mom that I *can* read, it's just all in my head and I'm just stupid... Personally, I think it has something to do with the rapes because I was a bad-ass kid because my first male teacher because you think every male is going to do it to you. I was a bad-ass so I got put into this class where we really didn't have to do anything, no spelling mattered or punctuation, nothing... I was reading in Kindergarten... by the end of Grade 2, I couldn't read.

Shawnene believes that the abuse that happened in early childhood still affects how she learns today as an adult. Now 21, her primary learning strategy is to ask her mom. Her mom reads for her, speaks for her and interprets the world for her. Were other possible sources of information and learning blocked by the impact the abuse had on her learning to read and by her withdrawal from other people?

Pat cites abuse at home as the reason she ran away and had to quit school.

Pat: I left school in Grade 10... Well you know I didn't grow up in a very good family home especially with my step dad—he was a little bit physically abusive and verbally abusive like it was just constant and horrible so anyways that made me really unhappy at home so I just couldn't stay there and in Grade 10 I left like I ran away from home and I got a job and I was 16 and I could look after myself.

Judy tells of a time when she received a letter related to her welfare payments and “flipped out.” She sought assistance from her sister, asking her to explain what the letter said. Judy's history of abuse and her addictions at the time kept her from comprehending important information; kept her from learning what she needed to do in order to maintain her claim.

Judy: One time I got this letter from... this attorney consultant sent to me that referred to my file in her office that she was going to close it if I wasn't in touch with her. And I thought she was referring to my file with my social worker and I freaked out and it was just a total misunderstanding... Well the reason I didn't read that particular letter right was because I was in the middle of a personal disaster. Everything was falling apart around me at that time; I was already in a bad place. I can't comprehend as well when I am in that place emotionally.

Stressors have different impacts on the lives and learning of adults. People who find themselves in a “bad place” emotionally will not comprehend the world with full clarity and understanding. They may not be able to fully evaluate important information related to their lives. Whether the stress ultimately creates missed opportunities, as in the case of race and poverty, or the more extreme emotional closing off of the world, as in the case of sexual abuse, participants tell us that stressors leave their mark on how they as adults learn.

Learning Culture of the Family, Community and School

Family and Community

The learning culture of the family and the community was often voluntarily cited by the participants as being a basis for them to build on. Again, we did not ask them what and how they learned as a child. We asked them to tell us about something they did well and they took us back to the learning culture of the family and community. Both Native and non-Native participants recalled learning a variety of skills from aunts, uncles, parents, siblings and grandparents.

Earlier Ann described how as a 5-year-old child she had a specific task in the job of spinning wool, where she was shown what to do and then expected to repeat the task multiple times to complete her part in the large job the group had undertaken. Expectations were high and her job was critical to the outcome of the overall project.

Ann: There would be like 15 of us, like my mother, my dad, aunties and uncles, my grandparents.

Interviewer: And they'd all be in on the knitting?

Ann: Yes, we all worked together.

Interviewer: So, men and women, young and old?

Ann: Yes, but they taught us very young. We all like, we all worked in groups outside the home. The adults talked, but not the young ones. I really don't know what they were talking about... we never really listened to their conversation. We were always busy...

Interviewer: Would they sometimes reach over to show you or correct you?

Ann: No, once we were taught to do what we had to do, we had to learn on our own, too... We watched the older ones. The older ones, they go to bigger, do the sweater, the younger ones, the smaller ones, they do the sleeves. It was just like a factory. By the time I got to my teens I was doing sweaters; I mean big sweaters, like 46s.

It is interesting to note that in these descriptions the teaching is often indirect. The children are shown how to do some things, and simply exposed to other skills or practices.

David has also made connections to the teachings of his elders as an adult. In many First Nations communities the Elders are an important learning resource but David suggests the younger people do not always value them. He also points out that it takes a time commitment on behalf of the participant to learn from the elders. For those who discover this community learning resource early in life, it can provide a wealth of information related to culture, history and sense of self.

David: The catch is we've got to sit down and listen to them. I spoke to one Elder. He spoke to me about four or five hours. A lot of things he said I didn't know about.

Thomas tells of specific skills he learned from his grandparents. As Thomas recollects, his grandparents were very specific in their teachings and in their feedback.

Thomas: [When I was] nine, ten years old I'd go over every summer to visit with my grandpa. I'd spend three weeks over there. In that time, my Grandma

taught me how to knit, sew, needlepoint. There isn't anything I can't do. It's just like, I'm Mr. Crafty... Every one of us grandchildren know how to sew and knit [52 grandchildren].

Participants also mention absorbing information or the basis for specific skills at an early age. What Doug describes may not demonstrate teaching, but it is definitely learning.

Doug: My father was a carpenter, and he had a lumber and millwork and a hardware store. So a lot of my summer or weekend work was through him to assist some of his contractors or people that were dealing with the store... I was farmed out to whoever needed a man or a boy at that time, to do some work. And over a certain period of time, just by seeing or doing, I gained certain skills. Now it's a matter of whether you take them further or not...

That was strictly learned by looking over my father's shoulder... So you go and get a set of blueprints and say how did they draw that? You sit down and say well that is how they drew that and you apply it. I had a head start because I had seen my dad. He also drew plans for apartments blocks and supermarkets and that type of thing for his business so I was exposed to all his papers and drafting equipment that type of thing. Just something I was exposed to.

Family members play an important role when participants struggle with the formal education system. When Marie quits school, her mother and her mother's expectations play an important role, both in her quitting and in what she does next.

Marie: I think it was her [my mother's] suggestion [to quit school] in the end. But it was not OK to sit on my butt. Then I had to go to work or you know whatever—well I left home immediately—at one point I came back home and she said I'll take you to the craft store and we'll teach you how to knit or something and so until I could find work, when I was at home, that is what I was expected to do, to keep busy and to learn something.

With family and community are where we first learn to be learners and where we first discover if we are “good” at learning. Words like support, encouragement, safety, help, comfort, and understanding describe the positive experiences. Families sometimes also offer learners negative or stressor feedback. When asked if she had ever been told she was stupid, Cynthia answers:

Cynthia: Yes—but now I know I am not as stupid as my parents made out.

Not only is it the support and encouragement offered by the pro-learning families, but also the actual content, the early understanding of “how things work” that provides participants with a learning foundation for life. As Thomas says:

Thomas: You don't soak it up when you are little, but when you get older you say, Oh that is what he was talking about. Now lots of things he said make sense.

School Learning

When we asked participants about how they learn as adults, we heard many references to their time spent in school as children and as teenagers. While some participants cited poor school experiences related directly to specific teachers or questionable placements, others did not speak of the school experience in any detail. The school experience affected participants in their adult learning strategies in that many avoid institutional learning for

either emotional reasons or they were “turned off.” Others feel that what they learn in the system of formal learning is irrelevant to their current lives.

Brent: I left school in Grade 12. I quit because I didn't think it was necessary. I was going to be a farmer... I was the only boy and it was just expected that I would take over the farm and by Grade 11, I was a man. I was supported, kind of encouraged to stay and work on the farm.

During his interview, Doug found himself questioning why his school career had gone the route it did. He and his parents found that in retrospect, Doug's placement in the modified program may not have been the correct decision.

Doug: I left school in 1964. Grade 9, pardon me, during Grade 10, I had completed Grade 9. It was a modified program, to what degree I don't know. Alls I know is that when I moved from elementary school to high school I was put into a modified program at that time... Looking back now and what my parents said or my dad said that may have been a mistake to put me in that type of program... In any classroom there is a smart side and a dumb side and you are always put in one side or the other. I was in the dumb side. There was a bit of testing done, previously, of which I don't know the results, at all.

Janet provides another look at the school system, where she was failing and knew she needed help but was unable to ask.

Interviewer: If you'd have gone right back the next year, would you have passed those courses? [three credits short for graduation]

Janet: No, probably not. I took too hard of courses... I shouldn't have taken those courses.

Interviewer: Why did you take them? Do you remember?

Janet: No! I think I should have asked for help too.

Interviewer: Why didn't you?

Janet: I was too shy to ask.

Interviewer: Were you aware during those semesters of Grade 12 that you weren't doing well in Grade 12?

Janet: Yah, actually I think the principal had said to me I needed to pull my socks up, sort of thing or I wouldn't make it—but I don't think they really offered that kind of help then. I wouldn't hesitate to ask now.

Interviewer: ... Why?

Janet: Cause I'm older now. I've seen more things. I know more.

Participants also touched on the relationships they developed with their teachers. These relationships often formed the basis for their view of themselves as learners.

Faye: Sometimes we tend to be too critical. I think we should not be too critical... If a person criticizes you go back and criticize them. That's not the way to do it... It stops you from doing right. You do worse... Teachers cannot be too affectionate... If there's too much criticism it stops a person from going to his goal. I think that's what happened to me... You don't fail a person at Grade 8. That's the worst time in your life... I think people learn their own way... they learn slowly sometimes, medium or they learn fast. Everybody's different.

Marie places much emotional importance on the learner-teacher relationship.

Marie: I hit high school and there were teachers there who scared me. "Get me out of here!" ... Oh I had wonderful teachers too... I don't have personal issues with that [power and authority]. I think it is just not coping... Some people are just somehow intimidating to others.

Contrast these comments with the positive experience that Cynthia relates.

Cynthia: I repeated Grade 7 twice because back then we used to call it for the dummies, the slow people. And Mum said no. So I got a very good, Mr. S, Grade 7 teacher who was excellent. And he took the time to teach me a way of learning that had really helped... He cared. He took the time to show me different ways of learning... He sat down and explained things to make them easier for me to understand...

Interviewer: Did he teach you in different ways than he taught the other students?

Cynthia: Yes, like in Math he would find simpler ways for me to understand—almost in layman terms.

Sometimes participants are able to identify as learners what they were missing in their schooling. They refer to it as what they did wrong, where they messed up and appear to feel that now they could be successful at school, if that was what they wanted.

Doug: So many things I just couldn't get together going to school...Probably one of my biggest problems was my self-confidence all the way through my schooling. And yet I knew—that I had, for whatever reason my confidence as far as working and pleasing my boss or people working around me or whatever I was able to do that type of thing so therefore, I had more confidence and that's why I left school.

Some participants may have developed survival strategies early on rather than developing learning strategies. These survival strategies usually fall apart in the upper Grades, 11 and 12, and leave the student flailing. Some may even be shocked to find they have put in the required 12 years and then are told they will not graduate.

Karen: I'd always be like, well, I have to go pee and then either I just wouldn't go back or I'd wander the halls and hang out and then go back like 15 or 20 minutes later... or I'd just sit there and look around and then copy off the neighbours. I did that all through high school. I copied off my friends like all through high school. My Social Studies 11 that is how I got through it. I never did any of the work... if you did most of your homework and you did your assignments, you would pass, even if you flunked all the tests and that is what I would do. I would just copy off my friends, never do the work, I'd do my homework, I'd copy it in the morning before school, copy my assignments and flunk all the tests and I'd pass... Now I wish I didn't do that because now I can't do it... I kind of realize there is no one who can give you the answers you got to do it so it is kind of hard getting back into it and doing it.

Some of the survival strategies developed by the participants in response to school do work in the outside world. Strategies like charming others to do your work, "borrowing" information and having great confidence in yourself can assist you in reaching certain goals. Sooner or later however, most of the adults

with little formal education we talked to find that acknowledging their skill deficiencies actually frees them to learn more.

Thomas: I went through a stage in life when I thought, “Am I an idiot?” And it’s true—you do come across that a lot. No, like, I can outsmart the best of them, like in the sense, maybe I can’t write it down on paper, but I am smarter in a lot of senses of the word smart, right, I can baffle people with whatever, I can talk to people about stuff I have no idea about, but I use my deduction of what I see, and usually I’m on. Now in the last 10 years of my life, I’ve sat back and said, “No I can’t do that. Can you show me?” Now there is nothing I can’t do.

The public school experience is a powerful influence that shapes all our lives and participants told us about both positive and negative relationships and events from that time. For some, their views of learning and their learning ability are validated by the formal system; others find themselves challenged by it. They may find their natural aptitudes do not count in the formal system. On reflection, some participants have an understanding of why the system did or did not work for them, others tend to blame the system, while others simply remain indifferent.

The Leaving School Experience

Adults with little formal education are also by definition “early school leavers.” Many of the participants made reference to how and when they left school and the related feelings they may still hold today. When and how the adults in our study left school becomes important to how they learn as adults, primarily in terms of choosing formal education as a learning option. When asked why high school did not work for her, Marie explains how the emotions connected with her school experience caused her to leave school early and to never return.

Marie: It’s emotional to be intimidated by somebody who is a humourless instructor... The topic is already so dry that you can’t stand it and then you’ve got to deal with someone who has no sense of humour and who is intimidating and that’s all emotional. It’s not that I wasn’t capable of learning in high school... It’s not that I’ve developed any better reading skills... since then. It’s not that I can do math any better now... It was that emotional aspect that turned me off and keeps me turned off.

Few of the participants said they quit school. More often than not, it appears to be a case where other things “come up.” Some may have made the conscious decision to quit school; more often it was a set of circumstances that set the process in motion. Doug tells of his choice to skip a single day of school and take the bus downtown where he was offered a job, which he found more challenging and more rewarding than school.

Doug: And why I left, I mean I can sit back now and say I was bored with the situation and had an opportunity to find and get work and partially that was it. ... I was probably better at working than at going to school, or the payback is better... Not necessarily monetarily... My dentist friend says “Doug, you could be a dentist in a minute”... And I say no, no. “Yes, you could. It takes the same skills”... So somewhere in my school life I wasn’t successful at, or felt I wasn’t successful at school. I moved on. He didn’t. He stayed in the system. [The system] it didn’t work for me. Or I felt it didn’t. I don’t know if it was just circumstance. And funny things can happen, when I say funny things can happen, I was a kid of 14,15 enrolled and I had to be bussed to school and it was so easy not to take one bus and take another bus. So you take the other

bus and you go to work. And then six months later your parents get cut off child pension then “Doug, how come you aren’t going to school?” I say, “Well I am working for Company X Auction House”. Was that part of the reason or circumstance that brought me to the fact that I didn’t complete school? I didn’t up and quit, I mean I did up and quit. Without anybody’s knowledge I just didn’t go anymore. I took the other bus.

School leaving is frequently tied up in family and cultural situations and responsibilities. Others simply take the other bus. For some of the participants who grew up on farms, the distance to the high school was an issue. For others, family upheaval due to sick parents, a death in the family, divorce, criminal activity or poverty contributed to early school leaving. It may contribute directly, as in making it difficult to physically get to school, or it may just confuse the child or teenager to the point that learning is not possible.

Bruce: I went to school fulltime until Grade 3 and then my parents divorced... Education wasn't a priority... Up to Grade 6 I was picked up and brought to school but I would hide out and not go to school... My grandparents were from Sicily. They didn't speak a lot of English... I'd go over to Grandma's house... They were uneducated... I got into lots of trouble. Robbing. I broke into bus depots. I robbed. I stole from gas stations... I quit going altogether after about one week of Grade 10. Then I came to Canada... The judge told my mother, either I'd be in prison or I'd be dead before I was 21 if I didn't get out of the environment I was in... So we came here. I have report cards going back to Grade 4. I was basically an average child. I wasn't smart. I wasn't dumb.

David is another participant who tells of a family situation that forced him and his sisters to quit school. He was in Grade 6 at the time.

David: My parents got into an accident, where a lady was drinking alcohol and she didn't see them... We didn't want to leave them, because they were hurt. We were going to school at the same time... so we stayed home and helped them out. Me and both my sisters, we dropped out to look after our parents after the accident.

For Judy it seems as if her formal education was not a priority to her or her family. But there may have been other factors putting stress on this family.

Judy: I only have Grade 8 and I failed Grade 8. It wasn't that I couldn't learn, just that it was 1½ hours each way, and there was just too much to do on the farm.

For those who were “kicked out” the stigma of school leaving takes on a new and less pleasant flavour. It is not that they had better things to do; they were told they are not welcome at the institution. Returning to the same institution and authority figures that kicked you out is extremely difficult, and usually avoided.

Karen: I got kicked out of high school last year and I couldn't go back because I was too old now and plus I didn't really want to go back after they kicked me out for such a stupid reason.

Participants were not proud about quitting school nor did they say they actively made the choice to leave school early. Rather it was something that happened, either beyond their control or as a result of another action or many actions. Many of the participants reflected on where their lives would be now had they remained in school. The majority of participants find their lack of Grade 12 an increasingly limiting factor in their lives.

Certificates and Diplomas

Participants respond in two basic ways to their current status of being “adults with little formal education”. The first group, the “I can” group, feels that formal education is unnecessary or irrelevant to them; they have essentially worked around the situation. The second group, the “I can’t” group, uses their lack of education as the reason for their misery or their explanation for not accomplishing more. This is in evidence again when we look at their references to graduation, certificates and diplomas.

Many of the participants had attended some form of formal education after their high school experience. However, it either involved flexible programs, which allowed the participant to feel in control, as those mentioned below, or the experience was mentioned only briefly in their interviews. Some mentioned starting programs and dropping out prior to certification, some felt programs did not meet their needs, and others made minor reference to time spent in formal education after high school.

Our main criterion for participants was that they not have a Grade 12 diploma, but some have gone on to other certificates without it. Judy has her passed her General Educational Development (GED) Test, Bruce has his pilot’s license and Doug passed his Trades Qualification Exam. In each case, while participants could have taken organized institutional learning to attain those certificates, they chose other methods and worked around the system. Judy was able to do her GED without formal classes, Bruce took his wife with him to Ground School and Doug challenged his exam without taking classes. While they were motivated to get certain certification, they were not motivated to attend classes in the “regular” way.

When participants were asked about how they learn as adults, they brought up their own level of certification in a few of the questions. If they had not already mentioned their certification level, it would often come up after the following two questions:

- 1) Is there something you would like to learn more about or to do?
- 2) What are the qualifications for your current job?

Participants’ responses were mixed as to whether they felt graduation was important for them. In British Columbia there is the Dogwood Diploma and also the “Leaving School Certificate.” Anita is well aware that her Leaving Certificate is not the real Grade 12. Many do not realize this until long after high school.

Anita: I went through 12 years of school and only got a certificate. I would say I really have about Grade 8.

For Karen, graduation is a definite goal for her, related to her family.

Karen: No one in my family has graduated. So if I do I would be the first one...

However, for Harold, he sees the on the job experience as being a more valuable way for him to learn, rather than going back to school for certification and a piece of paper. He wants to be judged by results rather than the qualifications, and also mentions the amount of time it would take him to get certification.

Harold: When I was going through vocational school, it was on the job experience. That’s how I like to go through. Not where you have to go five years to school. The only test you could do is the one that will turn the motor. That’s the test.

While the questions we asked related to how adults learn, we also got some responses that answer the question, “Why do adults learn?” As we discussed earlier, adults need to be motivated to learn. One of the things motivating participants to learn is the desire to get ahead. Three of the participants mentioned they would return to school to learn what they needed in order to “get a better job.”

Karen: Oh yeah that [dealing with drunks] is pretty much what motivated me to get my Grade 12 because I don't want to be working there the rest of my life. So, yeah I want to try and get my Grade 12 and find a different job... Just to have it [Grade 12] if I want to go back [to school] later and do something else [workwise].

Interviewer: Is there something right now that you can think of that you'd like to learn, or some subject you'd like to learn more about or something you'd like to be able to do?

Janet: I think I'd just like to get my Grade 12.

Interviewer: Why?

Janet: Because I feel like a failure. I was missing 3 credits and I was already a year behind so I didn't want to go and finish Grade 12...

Interviewer: Are there other reasons you want Grade 12?

Janet: Well, I was offered a job with Social Services but I needed my Grade 12.

Interviewer: Is there something right now that you would like to learn more about?

Harold: I'd like a higher education to get, to receive my diplomas to get a proper job.

As we see above, while Janet and Harold are directly connecting the learning involved in getting their Grade 12 to getting better jobs, that is jobs that have a Grade 12 requirement and little else. Karen and others saw it more as a starting place or stepping stone to further education which would assist them in getting that better job.

Elsewhere in the interview Harold points out the irony of needing the certificate to look for a job but not to do the job. He finds that the learning required for the certificate and the learning required for the job do not always match up.

Harold: When I got on the job, I didn't need all that education. I just needed the job experience. If I go out and look for a job—if I don't complete that piece of paper then I go in one door and out the other.

Some of the participants accepted this, while others found the Grade 12 requirement irrelevant to any learning required for the job. Harold is caught knowing he needs more formal education, or the diploma, yet he does not personally value that learning.

Harold: I don't think a person needs a piece of paper saying he's qualified. I think that's unnecessary—as long as a person knows you can do the job.

Yet at the same time Harold knows he needs the certificate, or in this case, license, even though he claims to have the knowledge and skill for driving a big truck. It is interesting to note that he equates the Grade 12 with a driver's license, as he sees either as giving him an opportunity to work. In his case, the barrier to getting a driver's license is a large sum of money.

Harold: I know how to drive a big truck. I've lost my license and I can't get it back because I can't pay off my accident because you need that piece of paper. You need two pieces of paper. That's the problem I can't understand. If a person is willing to work why don't you put him in a job where it's not necessary for him to touch a wheel? That's where I am going wrong. Because I don't have my license or I don't have a Grade 12. That's the one thing I don't like.

David tells us about his goals and where he wants to be, but acknowledges that more education will be the first step for him.

David: My dream is shattered right now. I was going to work in the mill like my dad, but he's retired. That was my goal, to follow him, but now everything's computerized. For me to go and get a job, I need at least Grade 11 or 12.

For David, having the dream and the goal was the first step, but when he returned as an adult to an upgrading class at the local college in 1983, he faced a huge challenge. He had originally stopped attending school when he was in Grade 6 to care for his parents.

David: I did go back to school but I felt I was just in the way, so I just dropped out. I was too far out of school, and to me it looked like things had already changed to a new system. It was like I was too far—gone out of school. Like my reading and my math, like it was, like I was saying, I wanted to do it but deep down inside I knew it would be hard to go back, to learn all that again. It was like a little kid again, just starting out. The book they gave me and said read this and then study the words. I thought to myself, it was too hard for me to do, so I just left.

How adults with little formal education learn is related to the barriers in today's workplace for those without certification of Grade 12 completion. Many jobs require no previous skill but do require Grade 12. Adults do much of their learning on the job or are motivated to learn for a job. Without the hope of a job or the opportunity to learn on the job, these adults face reduced learning options and fewer life opportunities.

Ways Around "No Grade 12"

Some of the participants have been strongly motivated and have managed to leap the barrier and attend formal schools, not to complete their Grade 12, but as a method to compensate or survive—to work around the situation. These compensation skills are evident in several participants who decided for different reasons that Grade 12 completion was not an option.

For example, Brent relied on the mature student status to gain access into programs.

Brent: Education kept me from the work I wanted for many years. I could not support my family the way I wanted until I gained the education. Although I do not have a Grade 12, I was able to use mature student status and take the required high school classes to get into the program I wanted.

Marie demonstrated highly developed learning skills. When this apparent contradiction of being a "good learner" and not making it through the system to graduation, is brought up she tells us how she compensates and survives in a society where the certificate is weighted so heavily.

Marie: But did I need the system? Well, yes and no. I can remember filling in application forms that asked, "What was the highest level of education you

completed?" I didn't complete high school but I went to college. So I wrote seven months of college and let them assume that I had that Grade 12 education that was a requirement. Let them assume it and so by that I was compensating for what my downfall was there. I would not have gotten hired to the position otherwise and yet I was obviously capable and qualified to do that position... Well we get hung up though. When I left the government six years ago it took no time and a couple of years had passed and I realized that I'm technically unemployable. I haven't done any courses in the last couple of years. I haven't worked with any of the new technology. I am technically unemployable. I am a burden on society is what it felt like at that point. And so you've got to do something about that. You've got to get back in there... And it moves so fast these days and it is really tough... Maybe some of that [strategies] was developed from... what I was lacking. I had to become tough somehow. I didn't have that Grade 12 education that I could say on any resume "Yeah I got Grade 12. Let me in the door."... So I had to find other ways to get in the door and I had to make sure that I didn't blow it when I got in there.

Pat expressed a self-reliance that has become her key to dealing with her lack of certification.

Pat: That's another thing of the kind of person I am too—if someone says that I can't do something, I'll just go ahead and do it! I guess I like to defy oppression. If someone thinks I can't do something, then I know that I can do it. I'm a defying kind of person. I need to accomplish certain things in life—they nag at me like not having my Grade 12—it really bothered me until I finally got my GED.

Cynthia gives us another view of Grade 12, education and certificates.

Cynthia: It depends on what you call Grade 12. Is it education through the school system or education through life itself? Isn't life trial and error?

Lastly, Timothy, who used the same self-reliance but did not seek the certification that some of the other participants did.

Timothy: I've got a Grade 8 education.

Interviewer: I see you using that in your life as a positive strength, rather than as a deficiency.

Timothy: It is. I've had to learn to rely on myself and not on what I've been taught.

Earlier, we referred to the "I can / I can't" cycles. This group, the survivors and compensators, is in the "I can" cycle. They know they have learning abilities and they see their own strengths. They are prepared to work hard and long to get where they want to go. They are prepared to prove themselves.

Work Experience

For some of the adults with little formal education we talked to, their first jobs were very positive experiences where they found they were able to learn and develop skills. They spoke of the feelings of accomplishment this gave them and their sudden ability to garner the respect of the adults they were working for. Often they were challenged by the work in a way school had never challenged them. For those who were lucky enough to find work

in their area of ability it was a life changing experience to go from the classroom where everything was difficult to the real world where their abilities were appreciated and challenged.

Doug: You get a certain amount of feedback just in the pay cheque. But... also my peer group changed completely. I had people that were working in the same area, same job that could appreciate or not what I was doing maybe that was the [difference with school].

In this ideal situation, participants were able to use the skills and knowledge they brought to the job while developing further skills and knowledge. They then took it to the next step: the transfer of their skills and knowledge to other work and life situations.

Timothy: I think everybody knows what their natural abilities are. Mine were mechanics, which I discovered at a very young age. I just always had a way with gadgets, pulling things apart, and things like that. When I quit school I met a fellow who was a mechanic. He worked at a shop and there was a job available. I went down and applied for it and I got it. I had Grade 8. I started out pumping gas, changing oil, things like that. Eventually I started an apprenticeship... He'd do his side, then would say, "Now show me, show me—you repeat the process on the other side." So I'd do that, and he would tell me if I made a mistake. That's basically how it's done... I worked in the shop for three and a half years, and then the shop went bankrupt and then I tried other things. I knew that I didn't want to do it for a living. I didn't look actively for another job in mechanics to complete my apprenticeship. I was happy with what I had learned up to that point when the shop closed. I had learned everything I wanted to learn up to that point, so it was time for me to do something else... I went and worked at a mine for a year in the interior of BC. I knew most of the things, but it was much heavier equipment. I was working in a mill as trade's helper, basically the same thing I was doing in the garage, basically helping mechanics and learning. Now I was working in a mill with very heavy equipment... Lots of things I knew. As I say, I had a natural aptitude for equipment.

For those who did not get the right first job, things are very different for them in their adult life and their learning strategies. The magic combination of both work experience and education is the ideal for some. People face major obstacles with only one of the two and without either; many fail to find long-term employment.

Conclusion

We asked participants how they learn as adults and they told us about their childhood. We asked about how they learned informally, and they told us about school. We asked generalized questions about their learning and they told us about the specific stressors in their lives and their pasts. Our participants had a very broad view of learning and of themselves as learners. They were very aware of what affected their current learning strategies and some were very aware of why they did not complete their formal education. Some told us how they managed their lives without formal learning and others told us their lack of formal learning had kept them from what they wanted in life. But plainly, we heard

again and again from participants that the stressors in their lives, their learning culture as they grew up, their school leaving and their work experience all affected how they learned today, as adults.

One of the major areas where this set of life experiences seems to have had an impact is on that of personal agency. Much data emerged from our interviews related to that theme.

Agency

In May 2002, while still in the early stages of our research process, we talked a lot about how we thought participants in this research would say they learn. We talked about people that we knew, friends, family and students to try to make concrete what responses we might get from our target group when the time came to interview them. Often we reflected that we thought we would find that the participants in the research learn just the same way everyone else does. They would use a variety of different methods depending on the situation, what they wanted to learn and the individual involved. During one of our conference calls there was a shift and we began to reflect on the differences we have seen among our students and how they learn. Some of them seem to learn under any circumstances. The classroom can be instructor led or self-paced but these students successfully complete the course. Some students seem ready to take on the challenge of being back at school and others seem daunted by the experience. Some are able to deal with personal issues that come up in their lives in a way that does not seriously impact their participation in the class while others are overwhelmed by personal events and as a consequence, their schooling suffers. The amount of formal education that people have did not seem to fully account for these differences. We began to ask ourselves what did.

As we reflected on this issue, we repeatedly returned to the term agency. Agency can be defined “the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power.”¹⁵ As we looked at the data we felt that some of our students seemed to have more agency than others and that it was a factor we should look at in considering how our participants learn.

We then asked ourselves what specifically agency would look like. What should we be looking for when we analysed our interviews? If this term indicated the power to act in or on the world to achieve a desired end, would we see this in our interviews and would it correlate to anything significant?

While we looked for themes in the interviews, some aspects of agency began to emerge. These aspects formed five major sub-categories or types of agency within the main classification. They include:

- Self-confidence
- Control
- Choice
- Self-awareness
- Reflection

¹⁵ Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, page 22 (2000).

Self-confidence

If people are to learn something new, they need to believe that they are capable of learning. Otherwise, why would they try? Having self-confidence allows a person to undertake a learning challenge in the first place.

We found references to self-confidence in our participants' words. For example, Alice views herself as capable and as able to learn in the university setting. She is willing to go there because she feels she can be successful. Her self-esteem allows her to undertake this learning experience. Her agency facilitates her ability to achieve a desired end. When Alice talked about her decision to enter university even though she has never graduated from high school, the interviewer asked if she worried about not being able to do the courses.

Alice: No. I didn't think it would be a problem... Because it's not something I had to do. It's something I want to do... I haven't been to school in years but going back I know I can do it... It's just a matter of putting the time and effort into it... It just may take more time and take more effort to follow through with it.

Other participants also demonstrated their sense of self-confidence. Brent explains how he is a resource for others with regards to computers.

Brent: My friends are always asking me to help them with stuff on the computer. I know a lot about them and can do pretty much anything.

Some participants commented on things that they could do well. Bruce, who is recovering from a serious boating accident, explains.

Bruce: Then the OT [Occupational Therapist] said I'm good with numbers. When I was in the hospital, the OT, once she showed me to do something, she said I was way quicker than they ever anticipated... I've done better than these educated people... My hands-on skills have always been good.

Although Bruce acknowledges that he does not have extensive formal education, he clearly indicates his sense of self worth about other abilities. Some participants reported putting themselves in new situations because they wanted to achieve a desired end. They demonstrated a degree of self-confidence that would invite new challenges. Bruce explains why he is interested in learning about computers.

Bruce: I like new things. I like things that tempt my brain.

While some of the research participants demonstrated agency through their self-confidence, others did not. They doubted themselves and their abilities and they were quick to put themselves down. In response to a question about how comfortable she is with reading, Janet criticizes what she reads.

Janet: Ah, I think I read okay. I read the wrong stuff though. *Harlequin Romance*. Nothing really to expand my mind.

Similarly, Karen does not demonstrate the self-confidence of some of the other participants when she talks about how she has done in school.

Karen: On my own I probably wouldn't have done it. I would have done the work but I wouldn't have got to know it or I would have done it by cheating.

In coding and analysing the data we obtained through our interviews, evidence of self-confidence and self-esteem in our participants emerged as one aspect contributing to a person's agency.

Control

A second aspect of agency that emerged from the data is that of control. Numerous examples were evident where some participants acted in or on the world to get something they needed or wanted. They did not passively wait for things or information to come their way. They actively demonstrated ability to exert control on an issue as opposed to being controlled by external circumstances.

For example, Brent expressed a need to write better letters and explained that he'd signed up to take a writing course to help him. He demonstrated his agency when he didn't let his lack of a Grade 12 diploma stop him from attaining his career goals. Similarly he explained what he did to pursue another interest.

Brent: [I was] quite interested in pruning trees so I took a short course last year. Now I think I'll try to take a more in depth one. I found out about the first course in the paper. You know, the thing the college sends out in the paper.

Brent indicates that he has interests and knows where to go to learn more about those topics. He takes control of his learning needs to achieve a desired end.

Earlier, we saw that when completing an application form Marie simply omitted mentioning her lack of Grade 12, instead citing her seven months of college as her highest education level attained. This survival strategy also shows her control as an aspect of high agency.

Participants demonstrating agency related to control described numerous examples of acting in the world or taking some control to achieve an end. Janet talks about her work and describes how she first got the job and then the decisions she has since made about her job.

Interviewer: How did you get the job at 7-11?

Janet: Actually I had put an application in. [My husband] had encouraged me to go and update my application so I did that a couple of times and I got called in for an interview... just going in and saying have you had a chance to look at it. I did that a couple of times.

Interviewer: You took yourself out of the manager position. Why?

Janet: My kids were pretty young at the time... It meant too much time spent there, away from my kids so I took myself out of it.

When Janet found that holding a management position interfered with her personal life, she took steps to control the situation so that both her work and home life remained intact.

Doug also demonstrated agency when confronted with a need to get his carpentry certification. He had worked in the field for years but did not have the necessary credentials that would have given him higher pay. Rather than accept lower pay, he chose to challenge the Trades Qualification Exam for carpentry.

Doug: It's almost like a grandpa clause if you could prove a certain number of hours or years in the system you were allowed to write the exam. And it was one of those things you could write it five times in a row if you wished. As it turns out, I went and wrote it and was successful so I didn't have to back off and go back to school to pick up any extra math or anything like that.

Marie realized that being out of the workforce for six years had made her skills outdated. She determined that she would have to do something about that in order to take control of the situation to remedy it in a way that would allow her to get on with her life.

Marie: I am technically unemployable... And so you've got to do something about that. You've got to get back in there.

Bruce wanted to get his pilot's license but knew he didn't have the literacy skills to do that alone. He took control of the situation and asked his wife to accompany him to Ground School. Because of his agency, he did not let his literacy skills stop him from achieving a desired end. Bruce describes what his wife did for him in ground school.

Bruce: If someone was saying something I didn't understand, I didn't feel ignorant asking her. And I don't feel ignorant anymore asking people but back then I did... She would ask or she would write down notes. I used a tape recorder. I still do. I carry a pocket tape recorder... I use a tape recorder on my telephone... I would tape it so I wouldn't say something stupid or foolish. I could go back and listen to it. I do it to make sure I don't say something stupid. I'm trying to train myself. Years ago I couldn't do that.

Instead of feeling discouraged by obstacles to learning or accomplishing a goal, these participants demonstrated agency by taking control of the situations and working to overcome or go around any obstacles.

However, while the above examples demonstrate agency for some, many of the participants did not exert this kind of control in their lives. For example, Penny talks about getting information from professionals and what happens when professionals tell her something she doesn't understand.

Penny: I tell him to say it again. Yes, I feel confused and angry towards them. When I get angry I go away on my own.

Penny does not end up getting the information she was seeking from the professional. Similarly when talking about why she left school in Grade 8, Penny demonstrates no control over the situation. Rather, according to Penny, control was in the others' hands.

Penny: I left school in Grade 8. My sister pulled me; made me stay home to help out because Mom was sick.

Faye expressed an interest in learning about all kinds of topics but she did not demonstrate sufficient agency to act on these interests. She did not take control in the sense of doing what was required to achieve a desired end. Faye answers the question of what would she wish she could learn or learn to do better:

Faye: Maybe housework, cooking... just putting better ingredients, how to mix your food and make it taste much better... be a better, creative cook...

Interviewer: Do you try new recipes now?

Faye: Some, not too much. You have to have the ingredients for that...

Interviewer: So when you are cooking now you cook the usual?

Faye: Yeah, the usual, yes. The one you usually cook all the time and I'd like to make it more different. I cook the usual but I'd like to cook the unusual.

Karen talks about wanting to be back at school but when the learning is not working for her, she is not able to control the situation in a manner that will help her achieve her desired end of improving her literacy skills.

Karen: I get really bored and then I'll just be yeah, uh huh. I get it and then I try not to do it and then I end up doing it anyway. You know what I mean like just say you get it so like just say, yeah, uh huh just so they think you get it and they'll let you go.

The examples above demonstrate these participants' lack of agency to control a situation. The interrelationship of agency and control can also be seen in another context. For example, during a group interview session, Frank took control of the situation at various times. However, this control was exerted not to achieve a traditionally positive outcome, but in order to divert the questioning so that he would not be exposed as lacking. He certainly demonstrated a type of agency in his ability to take himself out of the hot seat. He did this however, to cover up his larger lack of control in the hypothetical situation being presented, how he would plan a vacation with money he won from a lottery.

Interviewer: You get to Fiji. You get out at the airport. How do you find where the best beach is?

Frank: Probably land on it. I don't know. The airstrip is probably not too far ... I'd look down off the private jet with the binoculars and say, there's one there.

Interviewer: Would you walk?

Frank: Probably not.

Interviewer: What do you think you'll do?

Frank: Probably catch a boat.

Interviewer: Are you going to rent a boat? Or buy a boat?

Frank: Buy.

Interviewer: How would you find out who has a boat for sale?

Frank: Probably the guy who made the jet would have a boat. He knows how to make a boat too.

Interviewer: So would you take him with you?

Frank: No, just get him to fax it over.

Interviewer: How would you learn to surf?

Frank: Probably ask one of the surfers.

Interviewer: So would you buy a board?

Frank: No, buy a tree.

Interviewer: Buy a tree and make your own board?

Frank: Yes.

While Frank's responses may seem comical or off base, he has controlled the interviewing situation. The other participants in this group session laughed at his jokes and his inability to describe realistically what he would do in the situation was not exposed.

Choice

Another aspect of agency can also be seen in a person's ability to look for, create, or be aware of choices. To recognize not only that choices can be controlled, but that they exist in the first place. This aspect of agency facilitates a person having options when plans turn out to be unsuitable. For this research, demonstrations of agency related to choice involved participants indicating awareness of alternative arrangements if they could not achieve their desired end the first time. They demonstrated their ability to act in the world in a way that facilitated their achieving a desired end.

Timothy talked about how he would go about getting information he wanted.

Timothy: I know the information is out there. I think we all know the information is out there and if I'm interested in a certain thing, I know where to look for it. The library. If you can't find the information in the library, there's places where you can find the information out. And, if you feel uncomfortable about approaching people, you go to books. I've lived [around here] all my life, and I know lots of people, so I've got contacts. And I've got family and they all have friends.

Timothy clearly has a number of strategies for getting information. If one does not work, he knows others. This awareness of choices contributes to his agency in the world.

Similarly Cynthia listed a number of options for looking to learn another language. Even in a smaller community, she was aware of back-up choices to finding the language classes that she wanted.

Cynthia: Well, first I'd phone either the School Board or the College.

Interviewer: If neither of them offered it, if they both said no, is there anything else you'd do before you gave up?

Cynthia: Well, we have a Multicultural Society here. I'd go through them. I'd go to the Multicultural Centre.

Many of the participants in this research however, did not exhibit this aspect of agency. They were unaware of how to find alternate ways to achieve a desired end. Their options were limited and as a consequence their likelihood of achieving that desired end was limited. This point was brought home in an event that, while it happened outside of the research, resonated for me on this aspect.

The dean of the upgrading department at one of our colleges told of an incident that may be instructive by comparison. She mentioned that on the Friday before the new semester was to begin, the Biology 050 class (the Grade 12 level required for such programs as Nursing) had over 30 people on the waitlist. The waitlisted students had been informed of that fact. Over the weekend, the dean had decided to open a whole new section to accommodate the waitlisted students. She called them all on Monday morning. Almost all of those students, two days after having been told the class was full, had made alternate arrangements to get the biology they needed. The upper level upgrading students were

clearly aware of alternate ways to get Grade 12 Biology and were competent to act on that awareness. I wondered that if the same thing had happened with fundamental literacy level students would they have been able to come up with backup plans if the literacy class had been full.

Self-awareness

A fourth aspect of agency to emerge from the interviews is awareness. Comments that some of the participants made demonstrated their awareness of themselves, their learning and their lives. They mentioned being aware that they had a poor memory or that they needed quiet in order to concentrate. We categorized these observations as representing a separate aspect of agency because such knowledge is a pre-cursor to acting on this awareness in order to achieve a desired end.

Janet demonstrates her awareness of her own learning challenges. When asked if she finds she does well in courses, Janet responded:

Janet: Usually, yes. I'm always scared taking tests, always...

Interviewer: Do you feel nervous taking the course, taking the training itself?

Janet: No, just the test. I'm fine as long as I get all the information I need because I find it hard to concentrate. I've got a bad memory. My daughter is in Grade 5. I've forgotten how to do decimals. I feel bad about that. I have a bad memory.

Marie also exhibits awareness of her learning strengths and weaknesses.

Marie: I am a very slow reader and I have to pause and review information regularly, but I can take it in and translate it into action.

Karen, Cynthia and Doug demonstrate awareness of factors that may affect their learning.

Karen: I read okay but when I read like novels or something, I'll be reading and then my mind will drift off to think about something else and then I'll think back to what did I just read and I won't be able to remember what I read.

Cynthia: I did secretarial first. I failed that terribly...

Interviewer: Did you know you were failing?

Cynthia: Yes, because Math was not my, back then wasn't my strong point.

Doug: I never had any problem reading and comprehending but if you asked me to read something out loud, I would stumble quite a bit. That's my self-confidence.

Alice demonstrates awareness when she talks about a computer course that she took in the past. She is aware that she did not learn very much because the level of the class was too high. She now knows how she would act on this awareness to achieve her desired end.

Alice: I didn't feel that I learned anything from it. Nothing retainable. It was information that I spouted back... This was pretty much my first experience. Even though it was a beginner's class, it was too much. I probably needed

something from Continuing Education—a computer program where they are starting from scratch...

Interviewer: This go-round if you decided to do it again, now you might take another course or you said get a book? What would you do with a book?

Alice: I'd have to look at it to see if even reading it is going to give me any understanding. If reading through it I have no understanding then I'd be going through Continuing Education.

Marie shows awareness of her learning needs and her ability to use this information to act in the world.

Marie: I prefer to have [things] written down and if somebody gives me directions I write it down. I take very thorough notes. And I guess I get my information back that way. I refer back to the notes a lot when I have them.

Bruce also demonstrates his agency through self-awareness and the ability to act when he talks about the vacation he would go on if he won a lottery.

Bruce: Holidays, to me, have to be educational. I have to learn from a holiday. I cannot go to a beach and just lay there... I went to Brazil. The first thing I did was get a phone book... I found video stores that spoke English and had English videos. I had video stores at the time so I was able to converse with them.

Bruce is aware that he does not enjoy vacations where he would just be sitting around. He uses this self-awareness to guide his actions to structure his world to meet his needs. However, not all participants possessed this type of agency. Faye articulated self-awareness about her own medical condition, but then did not act on this information to affect her own world.

Faye: Ah, interior decorating... but I have a hard time with my hands with crafts, a bit of arthritis...

Interviewer: Do you know very much about arthritis?

Faye: No. I never studied about it. I never tried to get anything for it. I said, well I'll do what I can. If I can't later on know what will happen. I think it gets worse. I'm not too sure.

In some cases, participants did not indicate initial awareness of themselves, their lives or their learning. During her interview, Penny talks about a summer job that she had. Penny said she knew everything and didn't need to learn anything for a summer job. She does not indicate an awareness of the complexity of the tasks required for her job. This lack of awareness contributes to a lack of agency or ability to act in the world to achieve desired ends.

Reflection

The final aspect of agency to emerge from the interviews was reflection. While awareness involved simple observation, in reflection participants demonstrated their ability to think about something, not simply to observe it. Timothy reflects on his lack of success at school but apparent mechanical aptitude.

Timothy: We are born with gifts... I had a brother who excelled at school... yet he couldn't put a Mechano set together... whereas I could, and, I mean, but I came home with F's on my report card. So, I mean, I knew I had this aptitude.

This reflection on Timothy's part demonstrates an aspect of agency. Often the various categories of agency are evidenced simultaneously. Later in the interview Timothy describes how his mother enhanced his self-confidence and subsequently his agency.

Bruce also demonstrates that he is not only aware of his school achievements but that he has reflected on the disparity between his life accomplishments and these school achievements.

Bruce: I'd say I'm probably like an average 15-year-old or 17-year-old. I can read most everything.

Interviewer: You talked earlier that you rated your reading initially at about Grade 3. Now you would say 15 years old, which is about Grade 10. How did that change happen?

Bruce: Again I think asking people once I got my self-esteem up. And what I learned off the computer. That helped my self-esteem because I was able to converse not as a total illiterate... I started getting good self-esteem... there's no question about it. If you don't have good self-esteem, it's very difficult to do anything. You could do all kinds of hands on things because you're proud of what you do. It's a self-achievement thing... That's why I am able to sit here today. Normally I would say no because I didn't want to show my ignorance but now I can just go ask people for help. Now I am proud of what I have achieved. It doesn't have to be monetary things.

He thinks about his literacy development. He thinks about why these changes have occurred and the effect that they have had in his life, on his ability to do things, and on his self-esteem. His reflections indicate the presence of all five aspects of agency: self-confidence, control, choice, awareness and reflection.

Doug also possesses the reflection aspect of agency and has thought about some of the reasons why he did not succeed in school but why he has succeeded in the workplace.

Doug: Probably one of my biggest problems was my self-confidence all the way through my schooling. And yet I knew—that I had, for whatever reason, my self confidence as far as working and pleasing my boss or people working around me whatever I was able to do that type of thing so therefore I had more confidence and that's why I left school.

These examples of reflection are very closely related to the self-esteem aspect of agency. Did the fact that these two men have skills that were acknowledged by the larger society, consequently building their self-esteem, set the cognitive conditions that facilitated the development of their reflective skills?

When David talks about his attempts to return to school as an adult, he also indicates his ability to reflect on the process and some of the things that will be necessary for success.

David: I was too far—gone out of school. Like my reading and my math... it was like I was saying I wanted to do it, but deep down inside I knew it would be hard to go back, to learn all that again... To learn, you've got to have the will to do it yourself, just for a little push. You're going to have to want to do it and learn. Everything's computerized. It's really up to you. Like for myself, I'm

going to have to want this, and do it and put things aside and concentrate on this.

The reflection aspect of agency was also demonstrated outside of school learning. Harold, when asked how he would plan to spend a \$5,000 lottery win on a holiday, demonstrated his ability to think about and evaluate sources of information.

Harold: Umm... I'd probably have to ask some friends that had their parents going on a long vacation. I'd ask, how was it? What was the cost? How was the weather?

Interviewer: What else would you do to plan this holiday?

Harold: I'd probably have talk to other people.

Interviewer: Who?

Harold: Just not immediate family, it would be other friends who were working, who can afford holidays.

Harold has determined that he would need to ask friends who had jobs and therefore the money to travel or friends who had parents that could travel in order to get the holiday information that he needed. He has demonstrated his ability to think about a topic and evaluate information about it. Judy also showed this reflective/evaluative ability when deciding where to go for medical advice.

Judy: I would go to places like the drug stores, pharmacies, doctors, medical centres.

Interviewer: Would you go to your friends or not?

Judy: No, not my friends. They don't have the information more than me.

Judy demonstrates agency in her ability to list choices related to where to go to get medical information, in her ability to reflect on those choices in order to evaluate them and also in her self-confidence to use sources other than friends to meet her needs.

Conclusion

The five sub-categories of agency: self-confidence, control, choice, awareness and reflection, appear to be factors affecting how our research participants learn. It is not so much their education as it is life experiences that affect their futures. These life experiences influence the aspects and degree of agency that people will have and therefore how they will deal with their world.

Agency, like literacy, is not a skill that is measured simply by whether you have it or not. Some people have some kinds of agency, some of the time, in some circumstances. David, for example, who did not display a high degree of agency on some of our discussed issues, is accorded status within his Native community and holds a responsible position as Collector.

David: It's my responsibility to go around to the houses, for example, for like an Elder, I've got to go to the houses and say so and so passed away and they put money and I put the name down. It's my responsibility to make sure that money gets to that funeral. Anything happens to it, I get the blame for it.

While possession of agency seems to lie along a context affected continuum, it was apparent in this research that it is a powerful influence affecting people's lives.

Participants' personal levels of agency seem to be a significant factor in how they feel about themselves and how they get on in the world. In turn, agency itself seems to be partially affected by the various life experiences our research participants have had. The interplay of these two factors helps dictate what learning strategies they use as adults. To enhance this profound and interdependent relationship, the theme of emotions emerged during our data analysis.

Emotions

The participants in our research often spoke with feeling, and often spoke about their feelings. Learning was not described as cold and impersonal; rather, it was warm and associated with particular people. When she heard about the data, friend and colleague Winna Jorgensen made the insightful comment that the choices people made kept them in their comfort zone. When reviewing the data we found more evidence of the importance participants placed on feeling safe or comfortable.

If the emotion they feel in association with a particular learning strategy, for example, reading, is positive, they will be more likely to use books, rather than use another strategy that their experience has taught them to avoid. Although we did not have any absolute measure of their relative skill levels in the different strategies, participants rarely said they would choose a particular learning strategy because of its usefulness or application to a particular question. Instead, they talked about their feelings.

They observed that a good relationship with the person who has the information or the skill they want enhances learning. A poor relationship with that person may deter learning. Participants spoke of their fear of embarrassment, humiliation and rejection should they ask the "wrong" person. Many, particularly those without agency, or with low agency, were unwilling to take the risk. Often they had experienced embarrassment and ridicule at school, and would avoid situations where that experience might be repeated.

In their daily lives, participants chose among the five learning strategies outlined in the beginning of this chapter; however, it was often not a purely rational choice, based on the requirements of the situation, or the type of learning to be done, or the relative quality of information from two sources. Instead, participants based their choice on emotional considerations. As seen in the previous section, participants with more agency generally had a wider range of learning strategies available to them. People with less agency had fewer options for learning, and were often aware that they were stuck.

The section on emotions is organized using the framework of the five learning strategies: ask, read, observe/model, just do it and use technology. There appears to be a strong connection between the strategies participants choose and their emotional context.

Ask and Emotions

Asking someone was the strategy most frequently used by participants in our study. The emotional tone of the interaction was an important consideration when participants considered who to ask.

Ann: [Regarding picking a travel agent.] I wouldn't go to anybody that's grumpy looking. [Loud laughs from group.] They'd have to have a smile on their face. Then I wouldn't be scared to ask questions.

As was noted earlier, when Bruce was learning to be a pilot, he took his wife to ground school, not because she knew about flying, but because there was comfort in the relationship.

Whether by accident or design, sometimes a positive emotional context invites learning. Thomas describes what he calls his grandparents' "Tom Sawyer method" of getting him interested in learning to do crafts.

Thomas: When I wanted him to do something with me, Grandpa would say, "Hold on, I've just got to do this," and before I knew it, I'd be watching, then I'd say, "Can I do it?" Same with my grandma. She'd say, "Hold on a minute." They didn't drop what they were doing just to do what I wanted, and that enticed me into doing what they were doing. I'd wonder, what could be so enjoyable as that, that they don't want to stop and come and do whatever I wanted to do.

Sometimes negative emotions mean that people will choose not to ask. For example, Janet remembers when she was failing her Grade 12 courses.

Janet: I should have asked for help too.

Interviewer: Why didn't you?

Janet: I was too shy to ask.

There is always a risk of embarrassment when asking for information even when asking someone you know well. Participants may have some idea how a familiar person will react, but asking a stranger is unpredictable. Participants with more agency, particularly in the area of self-confidence, are less constrained in their choices, as these examples show.

Thomas: There are people who want to learn but are scared to ask. If you can get past the fear of asking you've got it half-beat.

Timothy: You just keep asking people. You might feel like a fool, going into the wrong place, but you just keep going to different places until finally you find someone who knows something about it and eventually you get steered in the right direction.

Bruce describes a change in his reluctance to ask people as he became more successful in his business.

Bruce: [Before] I didn't want to show my ignorance but now I can just go ask people.

Cynthia has come to the point where she feels comfortable admitting to a stranger that she needs help. When asked if she would feel comfortable asking a librarian for help looking something up and admitting she doesn't know how to use a computer, Cynthia replied:

Cynthia: I would think nothing of it. It wouldn't be a problem. I'd just tell them I'm computer illiterate.

Many participants preferred to ask someone close to them rather than an acquaintance or a stranger. Again, however, those with more agency had more options. Timothy, who consults books, maps, and charts, prefers to start by asking someone.

Timothy: If you feel uncomfortable about approaching people, you go to books. I've lived [around here] all my life, and I know a lot of people, so I've got contacts. And I've got family, and they all have friends.

Elders are a special source of learning for some First Nations people in our study. Listening while Elders talk is a source of much information about traditions and history.

David: To me it's really fortunate to have them [the Elders] amongst us... I wish they would never leave us, but we all got to go sometimes... The catch is we've got to sit down and listen to them. I spoke to one Elder. He spoke to me about four or five hours, sitting there. A lot of things he said I didn't know about, for example, what it was like, how it used to be, how they used to live in a long house at one time, where everybody used to share a long house.

Even so, as noted earlier, while David has access to Elders for information important to him in his First Nations culture, in the mainstream culture his options seem a little narrower and he relies mainly on his sister.

When choosing a destination for a hypothetical holiday, many participants chose places they had heard about from someone they knew well.

Ann: I'd go to Reno because of all the bright lights. My ex in-laws have been to Reno. They just went down to take pictures of the lights. They didn't stay, but I've always wanted to go.

Charles: Good friends of mine, he sailed there on square riggers around the Horn and he told me what it was like. I'd like to go around the Horn and see what it was like, but mind you on a big ship. I love ships. I'm at home on the ship.

Harold: I'd probably have to ask some friends that had their parents going on a long vacation. I'd ask, how was it? How was the cost? How was the weather?

Only one participant, high in agency, chose a destination with no personal connections.

When participants rely mainly on asking someone as a learning strategy, and they are constrained by fear of embarrassment to asking people they already know well, they may not have an alternate plan if the people they rely on can't or won't help. Faye's children are not much use at helping her learn the computer, but she is ambivalent about the only other possibility for learning that she can think of.

Faye: Yes, I do have a computer... My kids have no patience. I've tried... They won't show me. They're too fast. They say something, but you've got to show it... But the Reader's Digest had a good one. They had a good program to learn

computers. I was very interested but I said, "Oh forget it." Maybe I will. If they send it again, maybe I will.

Shawnene relies heavily on her mother and sister when she needs to get information. Her mother has to be with her when she uses the Internet, to help with spelling and reading, and her mother goes with her to sessions with her training consultant.

Shawnene: I usually drag Mom in there with me [to the training consultant] so if there's something I don't understand, she can tell me. Then, if there's something he doesn't understand what I'm saying, she... kind of steps into the middle and tells him what I'm trying to say.

Interviewer: So are you okay with just asking those people for help when you need it?

Shawnene: "Um, not really. My mom usually will do it for me."

Shawnene asks her mother for help, not necessarily because her mother is a good source, but because she is a comfortable source. She knows of several people she could ask about learning to sew, for example, but does not ask them.

Read and Emotions

A couple of participants used books in order to make themselves more comfortable when using the most popular strategy, "ask someone." Again, the participants talk about this strategy in terms of their feelings. They don't say they go to a book first so they will be able to understand better when they talk to someone about the subject, or so they will be able to assess the accuracy of the information or advice they get from someone else.

Doug: There are some things you just have to go to a book to start with... You are self-conscious if you don't feel you know enough. [You] want to at least enlighten yourself to a certain degree before you make contact with other people... What stopped me from going to somebody is I would rather look it up in a book first to familiarize myself... It's personality and it's self-confidence—maybe lacking in self-confidence—that makes me go to books and that follows with a lot of stuff... I will go to a book and delve into it first before I will expose myself to whatever I feel my fears are.

Others use books, but prefer to have someone there to help, to make the process go more smoothly, so as to avoid negative emotions. Karen talks about learning to drive.

Interviewer: So you would rather not have just the book and you?

Karen: Yes. It would be a lot easier with another person there.

Interviewer: So you kind of want to work through it with somebody, not necessarily have somebody teaching you?

Karen: For the reading part—like where you have to read—that would probably be OK alone. But after you've read it then have someone to kind of talk to you and have them kind of put it into smaller words.

Observe/Model and Emotions

Observing was often done within a family setting. All family relationships are associated with a complex set of emotions both positive and negative. Doug didn't talk about what kind of relationship he had with his father, but he was drawn to look at the blue prints and drawings he made.

Doug: It wasn't a sit down beside him [my dad] either. It was a just look over the drawing very briefly and when he more than likely wasn't there, but I was motivated for whatever reason to look at all this.

Thomas describes a warm, shared experience with his grandfather where he watched and learned.

Thomas: Grandpa would build it in front of me. I would copy. Mine would be all crooked and bent. He would say, "Good for a first time. You see how mine looks."

Earlier Ann told of learning to knit in a large circle of extended family, grandparents, uncles and aunts, cousins and brothers and sisters. She learned by observation, then by imitating what she had seen.

Just Do It and Emotions

Participants who preferred to "just do it" often got satisfaction from the act of producing something, or from the positive reaction of people around them. They described their use of this strategy in terms of how they felt about themselves and the people they related to, rather than its efficacy as a strategy.

Harold: People say I'm good at doing things. If something breaks down, I can fix it. If someone wants something built, I can do it.

Doug recognizes that positive feedback is a motivator for him to improve his carpentry techniques.

Doug: Maybe why I have done as well as I have is because there has been somebody there to appreciate it, and whether it's my wife or my son or my colleagues or my friends or the people that I do work for, they can appreciate when I have done something for them, when I have done a good job. And doesn't that hold true in so many things? It's getting back to the ego.

Negative feedback is an equally powerful influence. Pat talks about the man who was teaching her to hang gyprock.

Pat: This guy was really nervous teaching me how to put up gyprock. He made me nervous and it was just a silly little task really but this guy was freaked out and his behaviour rubbed off. Negativity rubs off—he was flipping out at me.

Use Technology and Emotions

Technology is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, some people who seemed not to have enough skills to read print easily or efficiently said they used the Internet to get

information. On the other hand, some participants found new technology to be an insurmountable barrier, shutting them off from information and skills they think are necessary to get ahead in life. Relationships with technology are full of emotions, and again, it is the emotion, rather than the usefulness of the technology, that seems to dictate how much and how successfully the strategy is used.

Computers

Participants expressed strong reactions to computers and the Internet. They love them or they hate them. Computers are easy to use or impossibly difficult. Often difficulties with reading are compounded when using computers, although some people find them easier to “read” than a book. Comfort levels seem to be more important than skill levels in determining whether and how participants use computers.

Bruce bought a new computer system for his business, but let it sit idle because of his reluctance to let his staff know he couldn’t enter the data.

Bruce: I bought the computer system, which at that time was \$104,000. It arrived. I put the system in. I plugged it in. I turned it on and nothing came on. I went, "What's wrong with this?" So I phoned the computer company, which was IBM. They said, "You have to load data in." Well, I was lost. That was it. So for ... two years I didn't want to tell anybody that I couldn't read or write—especially staff. Finally I flew a guy in from California. I sat alongside him day after day, night after night, watching him load stuff and trying to train myself.

Karen, who as we noted earlier, has great difficulty reading the drivers’ manual without help, has lots of confidence in her ability to use the Internet; she thinks it’s easy, so she goes ahead with insouciance.

Interviewer: How did you learn to use a computer?

Karen: In Grade 8 I took a computer course, the basics. But that was the only time and when I went on Internet at school it is so easy you don't need to know how, you just kind of...

Interviewer: You didn’t have to learn it?

Karen: Well the person next to me kind of explained, "Type in what you want and press, 'enter'." That is about the only thing I know about computers though.

Interviewer: So how do you decide when you get millions of documents back?

Karen: Well you read through them and pick out, or you print out the ones you want. And then the rest of them you don't use.

Doug’s computer skills are more advanced than Karen’s (he has some experience with a drafting program) but he would rather do it by hand because it doesn’t feel right on the computer.

Doug: I had a very brief foray into looking at CAD programs for drawing and I’m a little bit too much of a hands-on person when it comes to design. I can use a pencil and a drafting machine and I can see the length of a line and I know that line represents whatever scale I am drawing in. I can use that scale to draw a house much quicker that I can [on the computer] where I can’t see the scale. I mean it may come up on the screen or it may draft out on the screen but it still does not feel the same.

In the workplace, Marie can and does use computers, but when she has her choice, she avoids them as much as possible.

Marie: I hate computers—they overwhelm me... I have agreed to email but I don't give my address because I didn't want all that information bombarding me.

Telephone

Marie, who feels overwhelmed by the information that comes on email, also rejects the automated telephone answering systems. She has enough agency to bypass it and get to what she wants.

Marie: If the information wasn't in the library I would get on the telephone... which also makes me crazy because it is automated. I am always pushing zero— just skip it and go right to zero. I just want to talk to somebody.

Conclusion

When participants spoke about the qualities of a good teacher, they placed a higher value on the emotions a teacher expressed than on teaching skills. Reviewing the data and considering all of the comments about teachers, whether professional teachers or informal teachers, three times as many comments were about emotions than skills (34 to 11). People talked about the importance of a sense that the teacher cared, rather than that the teacher knew the material, or could communicate it well.

Pat: I need to know the person and trust the person who will teach me.

Participants talked about their feelings when they talked about choosing a strategy. Generally they did not reflect on their relative levels of skill with different strategies, or make a rational decision about which strategy would be more useful in a given situation; rather, emotions were the most important element in determining how and why participants choose one learning strategy over another. Participants with more agency were able to find a way to use their strategy of choice even if there was some discomfort in using it. Participants with less agency were more likely to find themselves stuck if they couldn't immediately feel good in the strategy available to them. Those who had to rely mostly on "ask someone" as a strategy were particularly limited to those they had a positive relationship with. This raises the questions, what happens to people so poor, so stuck in the place they were born in, so lacking in agency that they are afraid to talk to strangers? What happens to people who are so lacking in language skills that they can neither read nor express themselves adequately, and are so circumscribed by their lack of choice that they have no one to ask except other people just like them?

How do Adults with Little Formal Education Learn? One Learner's Answer

The Learner Component of the Houston/Smithers Methodology

In this chapter we pull together the themes described in “Data Analysis 1: How do Adults with Little Formal Education Learn?” to help explore how they can come together in one individual. It is not our intent to describe a “typical” learner. Rather, the inclusion of this chapter is the fortunate result of the circumstances of the research methodology Dee used in Houston.

Setting the Stage

When it was decided that Houston would be part of this project and that there was room for learner involvement, Dee immediately thought of including a learner she had met only briefly, but who had research experience, with the LEARN Team.¹⁶ In the end it was decided that that learner, Kate Nesbitt, would play dual roles in the project.

Kate's first role was to journal her experiences as a learner and more specifically *how she learned*. Dee thought that the team could learn from what Kate had to say in terms of pointing at questions to ask or themes to explore in the interviews and in the analysis of the responses for the interviews. She also thought that we could evaluate the value of including learners' journals as a data collection strategy. Kate's second role in the project was to be as a researcher and we planned that she would conduct some of the interviews in Smithers.

Kate's first question was “Why me?” Dee was surprised by this given her involvement in research and her activity as a learner. But Kate saw herself as just one of many learners that an instructor could choose from. Dee had not considered any of the learners she worked with and did not think of Kate as a learner. Throughout this project, Kate was a literacy colleague, possessing equal or greater knowledge. But perhaps she “over—committed” when she also agreed to both the journaling and the research task, simply because she was anxious to participate.

It is only in reflection that we begin to understand what was happening at the time. Kate saw Dee as someone with power, someone who could help or hinder her in the things she wanted to do in the literacy movement. She had been offered an exciting literacy assignment that offered pay and prestige. How could she say that she was not “ready” to take on this challenge? Perhaps Kate felt that to show uncertainty might mean that any future opportunities would evaporate. Unwittingly, she had been set up.

Kate started school in September and came to Houston about once a week. It seemed there were always things to discuss and while she was kept abreast of the research, it was not the

¹⁶ The Learn Project is an ALCSP research project that was carried out by six adult learners and coordinated by Sandy Middleton that examined the feasibility and sustainability of a network of learners in British Columbia. For information, visit the Literacy BC website at <http://www.nald.ca/lbc.htm>.

priority when Kate and Dee talked. Kate is active with Literacy BC, was involved with Houston's International Adult Learner Week activities, became a board member for Houston Link to Learning, organized some learner meetings for the regional retreat, and was also working on a regional learner event. It was late fall when Kate said she would not be able to do the interviews. As with the rest of the team, many things were interfering with her completion of the work and the stress of it hanging over her head was too much. We agreed with her that she should drop the interviewing task and her project workload became smaller and more realistic.

Over the project Marina and Dee often discussed methodological issues arising from Kate's participation. Dee now believes she should perhaps have pushed for her greater involvement. But Kate, like Bonnie, was an undefined team member. At one point we were going to include Kate's data with the rest but the team felt she was not a true participant, as she had started the project as a researcher. Dee was uncomfortable not using the data she'd collected seeing it as important information that seemed to depict many of our themes so clearly.¹⁷

By the time this discussion occurred most of us had written our sections of the report and were ready for the project to end. Dee knew she could not now ask the rest of the team to incorporate the Kate material. After presenting our findings to the Adult Basic Education Association of BC (ABEABC) Conference in Prince George in May 2002, the idea of applying the themes to Kate's data seemed a viable compromise. Kate's data creates one answer to our question *How do adults with little formal education learn?*

Kate's Answer

Kate Nesbitt is the learner friend to this research project. Kate's role was different from that of our other participants in that we used her insights not to generate data, but to inform the data. Through Kate's interview and her journal we can further develop a picture of adults with little formal education. In terms of the themes we coded from the data, Kate provides us with a classic portrait of an emotion-influenced, high-agency adult with little formal education.

This portrait is framed by the four themes used throughout the report: learning strategies, life experiences, agency and emotion.

Learning Strategies

Kate's favoured strategy, as with the majority of our participants, is to ask, both trusted friends and experts in their field of knowledge. She listed people who she would go to for a variety of skills and information. She also mentioned asking people to refer her on to further sources, thereby casting her information net into a wider sea of knowledge. Kate is "at risk" for a specific form of cancer, so the way she obtains information on that topic is very specific.

Kate: How I collect my information is by talking to people who have had cancer, who have Barrack's Esophagus, talking to the doctor, talking to friends of mine

¹⁷ It is important to note that the team struggled with Kate's cross-area role in the project. She did not participate in the meetings but acted as both researcher and as participant.

that are nurses and the friends I have who use holistic remedies. And then I would read a book.

Indeed Kate's world is a wonderful patchwork of people available to provide information on a wide variety of topics.

Kate: I use people a lot. I pick people's brains all the time. But it is incredibly time consuming. When you are looking for a piece of information I will go to you and you will give me a little bit of information and name of somebody to talk to and they'll do the same and I'll spend a week, a month collecting information where I know that if I could understand reading better that the information would come... in a package. But life wouldn't be half as interesting.

When asked if she would ever use a book or computer to find information Kate gave this answer.

Kate: Only when absolutely necessary, like when it is my last straw, then I will. And ten to one I end up taking the book to somebody I trust and getting them to read it and to make sure I understand what I am supposed to be doing.

Kate is aware that for her to learn anything print-based means that she will need to rely on people for support. She will choose people she is comfortable with and trusts. When asked what she wanted to do better, she mentioned presentation skills, and realized that this was a task that required a more formal, structured approach. She mentioned a tutor and a Toastmaster Club as ways she could work toward her goal.

Kate: In learning to give presentations better there is a lot more writing and a lot more spelling, punctuation, on and on, where in my sewing I don't need any of those.

Kate is an accomplished seamstress and quilter. However, as a novice knitter, that task is much more complex for her as she must rely on patterns and reading in order to knit. Rather than struggle with a new skill and the required reading, she is driven to perfection on existing skills where she knows the vocabulary and understands the processes.

Kate: I have had opportunities to learn how to knit and how to read patterns but I have almost always found reasons not to because it is intimidating, extremely intimidating.

Desire for a product not available in stores forced Kate out of her sewing world and into woodworking.

Kate: I wanted nice pine dog gates to go with the house. I had never done carpentry work before and I sat down and planned it out like I would plan a quilt out... For me it was like putting a quilt together, which was like putting a dress together in miniature, when I first started quilting... And I built these dog gates and they look good... All I did was take the information that I had and put it to a new material.

Kate: I still had to have people show me how to run the machines to cut the wood... I went and talked to the guys at the lumber store and then I had some men friends that have equipment and... they showed me how to run it. All hands on.

Interviewer: Did anybody look at your design?

Kate: Yup. They all went, "Ooh, that'll work!" And they had no suggestions for improvement... At this point it dawned on me that sewing is construction. I had never thought of it that way, so flipping my knowledge over was quite easy.

What Kate refers to as "flipping knowledge" from sewing to carpentry, from fabric to wood, is a complex mental process dependent on her making the connections between the two skills and the two materials, then making the "transfer" from one skill area to another.

The learning strategies that Kate displays show how heavily she relies on people for her information and for the skill development to be hands on. While her number one strategy is "ask" she does so in a sophisticated way and her method of finding people and "picking their brains," indicates a high degree of agency. While she avoids reading and writing tasks, when they are necessary, she combines them with her preferred learning strategies to increase her comfort level.

Life Experiences

Kate did not go into any detail about her life experiences during her "growing up years" except to obliquely refer to stressors in her childhood. For her school experiences, she mentioned how she was able to "fake it" until part way through Grade 11. While we didn't delve into those experiences in any depth for this project, Kate is highly emotional when it comes to returning to the classroom.

One area that Kate did talk about was how she learned on the job. While to some extent these are survival strategies, they are also learning strategies. Some participants in our study mentioned similar learning strategies and then referred to them as "cheating" in order to learn a skill or piece of knowledge. Why do they call it "cheating" when adults are successful using a method other than reading to learn? Kate provides a good example of how she was able to learn on the job, even in a print-based task.

Kate: The hobby store I worked in decided to bring in wine and beer kits. I had never made a wine or beer kit in my life. I had no idea what you needed but what I did was I read the instructions for all the equipment you needed and figured out what was what [from the diagrams] and then as the winemakers came, the ones who had been doing it for years, I picked their brains. I did such a good job that I could tell people exactly how to make beer, exactly what was going wrong with their beer without ever making one beer. That was all from picking brains because I definitely didn't read the books at that point because I only had a Grade 5 reading level and to read the book was a foreign language.

For Kate to gain knowledge, she first develops a vocabulary then asks experts in the field. She is then able to add to her knowledge with comfort because she can converse with experts and "pick brains." As she illustrates, she works hard on the job and has always been able to find work in retail.

Agency and Emotion

Agency and emotion are taken together here as Kate displayed her agency in the interview and in her journal, often in terms of emotions. Kate is strongly influenced by emotions related to reading, writing and exposing her weaknesses in those areas. The trauma of feeling stupid and an inner voice that is always telling her to avoid situations where her

inadequacies are shown have previously kept her from dealing with her reading and writing.

Kate explains how she is often unable to deal with information coming in and is not secure enough in herself to ask questions of just anyone. She does not leave herself uninformed though. Unlike the low agency participants in our study, Kate pursues trusted sources until she is informed.

Kate: A lot of times when I am in a situation I do not understand, when I am feeling really uncomfortable, then I use the “uh huh” and I just bluff my way through it and I will leave the office and I will go and ask and I will find people I can find information from and pick their brains to get the answer. But if I am dealing with say my family doctor or a doctor I have an instant rapport with and I am quite relaxed with I will stop them and ask them to explain exactly what they are talking about.

When asked if she used the Internet, Kate again displayed the emotional side of her learning, with a follow up comment that displays her agency.

Kate: Internet is a lot awkward for me. I find that when I get on it that I end up with a lot of garbage and very little information. I find that frustrating and I quit... I have to get over that fact that I am intimidated by the Internet.

Kate gives us a good picture of the mix of agency and emotion when she speaks of the reality of where she is in terms of her formal learning.

Kate: A lot of people assume I have mastered a lot of learning ability to get where I am. It took a little bit of understanding for me to make that leap but I still haven't filled in between where I was and where I am. I have a bit more understanding but I am still using my survival techniques to the hilt in order to do what I am doing. For me, I feel as if I am missing that knowledge in—between... I actually missed three steps, I did a major jump and there is nothing between. It is like jumping from building to building... I have been making major leaps without filling in the gaps... Even for me to talk about it, my heart is racing. It makes me very vulnerable [to crash and burn but] now this is one less thing that I have to hide. A lot of learners hide so much.

We asked all the participants to tell us what they feel makes a good learner. The answers touched on motivation, good listening, interest, open mindedness, and ability to set priorities. Kate's answer is filled with agency.

Kate: What makes a good learner is someone who has an interest in improving themselves. Someone who is willing to conquer their fears to learn. That is a real learner. Someone who says, “Damn the torpedoes, I am going to do it anyway, find a way around it.”

As the learner friend to this project, Kate provides us with a view of the high-emotion, high-agency adult with little formal education. She has accomplished great things and at every step in her learning, we see, hear and feel the emotions she is dealing with.

Data Analysis 2: How do Practitioners do Collaborative Research?

This project was guided by two main research questions. The first question, “How do adults with little formal education learn?” was the “topic” question. We explored the data and answers related to this question in the first data analysis chapter. The second question was, “How do practitioners do collaborative research?” With this question we wanted to focus on how we worked as a team to produce knowledge, what worked and what could have worked better. In this chapter we analyse the data related to this second question—the methodological question.

While the inclusion of practitioners in research projects has been gaining attention in the past decade, there is little documentation on how practitioners actually *do* research.¹⁸ One of the contributions of this research project is a rich description of how literacy practitioners can work collaboratively to do research. We hope this description will serve others wanting to engage in collaborative research and we look forward to conversations with readers about the peculiarities, challenges and rewards of practitioner research.

The central argument of this chapter is that the approach to research that a particular project assumes is central to the project, not only to its process, but to its products as well. For example, collaborative research is significantly different from individual research. Further, there can be various degrees of collaboration within a research team. As we describe in this chapter, we chose to collaborate as fully as we could, sharing research tasks and control over research decisions. This research project, by virtue of being a collaborative one carried out by practitioners, presents interesting characteristics that can illuminate the impact of a particular research approach on the research process and product.

Data Collection

Given that the role of the methodology was always to be a key focus of the project, we collected data related to this aspect from the beginning of our work together. We had three main sources of data:

- Tapes of team meetings
- Email messages
- Journal and notes

Tapes of Team Meetings

The team met face-to-face four times over the duration of the project. All team meetings were tape-recorded. The tapes of the first meeting were transcribed as they contain

¹⁸ *The Second Edition of the Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2000) and the *Handbook of Action Research* (2001), for example do not present any description of projects designed, carried out and represented by practitioners.

discussions and agreements about team structure, roles and expectations and we wanted to be able to have verbatim quotations to refer back to. The tapes for all meetings were available to any team member to listen to. This was particularly useful when team members could not attend a meeting. The tapes allowed them to know what we discussed and even feel “as if they were there.”

Email Messages

As team members live in different parts of the province, most of our communication took place via email . Therefore, the core of the data for this chapter can be found in the more than 1300 messages team members sent to one another. Marina kept a file with all the messages and used them to analyse the methodological aspect of the research.

Journal and Notes

The team communicated via telephone both as a team with conference calls as well as through one-on-one phone conversations. We took turns taking minutes for every conference call. As well, we all kept notes of these conversations and these notes are also part of the data considered in this chapter. Some team members also wrote journal entries, which they occasionally shared with the team.

Details on the above and how they influenced our communication as a team are in the section on Collaborative Research found later in this chapter.

Data Analysis

Marina listened to all team meeting tapes, read all the email messages, read all of her own notes, and those passed on by team members. As themes emerged from these data Marina organized the information accordingly. During the February 2002 team meeting, Marina discussed these themes with team members and got their feedback. Using the team’s input she then re-organized the themes and looked in the data for quotations to confirm or refute the ideas. She then shared a draft of this chapter with the team. Feedback from team members was incorporated into a new draft, which was integrated into the full report.

One of the challenges of writing this chapter was the team members’ constant interaction and our reflection on that interaction. As more themes emerged there appeared to be no end to the data production and collection. We know now that this research process will continue until we have finished writing and even beyond that as we present the project results and continue to reflect.

The research methodology for this project was original and appealing in two ways. It was a project designed and carried out by practitioners and it was a collaborative project. Each of these two aspects deserves separate attention.

Practitioner Research

The fact that this was research designed and carried out by literacy practitioners influenced the research questions and consequently the process and findings of the project.

Life as a Practitioner-Researcher

When Paula, Kate, Dee and Darcy decided to collaborate on the research project, they already had jobs, and in most cases, full time jobs as literacy instructors. Kate works at Malaspina University-College, Paula works at the College of New Caledonia, Dee works at Northwest Community College and is associated with Houston Link to Learning. When we started the project Darcy was working at the Native Friendship Centre in Prince George. During the project she changed jobs and began working for the school board.

All four continued to teach while working on this project. This was not an easy task. Being a literacy instructor has its own idiosyncrasies. Some instructors work full time at colleges while others “cut and paste” three or four part-time positions together. This may be a mix of college (with full benefits) and community (with no benefits, no seniority, lower wages) employment. Whatever their working conditions, literacy practitioners, are accustomed to working many unpaid hours per week on top of their paid hours. Only Paula had a full time job where, for one term, she could assign a portion of her time to the research project.

Working in a small Centre, Kate had a hard time delineating her “research time.” In her journal, Kate reflected on her job situation.

I also try not to take on a double workload. It is hard to get release from class in any meaningful way. I don't like to miss class, students don't always like the disruption (depending on how good the sub is), it is hard to get a good sub, and preparing for the sub takes time. (Kate's Journal, April 2001)

Kate would work on the research over weekends and in her free time. Later in the project, she was able to get some time off and dedicate two days a week to project work.

At the start of this project, Dee referred to herself as a triploid. She had three separate part-time jobs, instructing at the college, regional literacy coordination, and this research project. Part way through the project she was offered another quarter-time college position. She was now quadraploid. She found balancing increased work hours, her passion for skiing and the research obligations challenging. At one point she “warned” the team that she was going to disappear for a while due to her work obligations.

I am going to be on email withdrawal—no FC [First Class, the Hub email system] access from April 11 to 17 or 18. I think I am starting a new job then to—9 more hours per week. I think I can fit it in since by then the snow will have melted. (Dee's email , April 9, 2001)

At the beginning of the project, Darcy had flexibility to dedicate her time to the project, but once the funding for her job ended at the Friendship Centre, she worked as a supply teacher and needed to be available when called. When Darcy later started full-time work with the school board, she had very little time to focus on the research project. Darcy

shared with the team the various jobs she was doing and how little time she had to dedicate to the project.

Wow, now that was a long week!!! I hear you Kate, no days off takes a toll on the body. I have worked every day this week—subbing. I have to let Aids PG [Prince George] know on Monday what I intend to do about their job offer—and I still don't know what I intend to do!! I'm not sure what is going to happen to my portion of the project.... I have started and will continue preparing for meeting with clients, but I don't think I'll be doing much in May. I suppose I will have to have everything developed and “approved” through you all and then carry out my activities in June...? (Message from Darcy to team, April 7, 2001)

Traditionally, academic researchers work in full-time jobs dedicated to research and teaching. Although this project was generously funded through the federal provincial Adult Literacy Cost-Shared Program, the team worked many more hours than either expected or budgeted for. Those hours came from personal or family time.

For practitioners, life is teaching—research was an add-on. This shaped the research process, the timeline, the resources and rhythm of the different research tasks. Paula refers to how she felt back teaching full time from a ten-year break.

I feel like I've really been non-existent since our January meeting... because I haven't been in the classroom for so long that it is all I can do. Period. That's just to teach that class, do the marking and the preparation the way I need to do it. Honestly, there isn't time for any real response to your email . (Paula, March 29, 2001)

Compounding the difficulty was the fact that the researchers did not have office space dedicated for their research work. If they worked in their offices at work students and colleagues could assume they were working on their “teaching” job and pull them out of the research focus. Other times they worked at home, where family demands could take over as well or where the setting was not appropriate for them to concentrate on the research project.

For example, on April 9 I took a release day to get my application ready for the MUC Ethics Committee. I arranged the release day the week before, and had arranged with the chair of the Ethics Committee to send my application up on April 17, the following Tuesday. [Monday was Easter stat holiday.] So on my release day I went early to the Centre and gathered together a few things for my sub, then went to the college, told [the administrator] that I was on a release day, looked at my mail and went home. I don't have an office at the Centre, so I couldn't work there; there is no office space available at the college for a full day [I could have had two hours here, one hour there, three hours in the other place] because we are so overcrowded, so I went home to work. I didn't have a good time, but I didn't get any work done. Mostly I sat in front of my computer and played games and stewed. (Kate's Journal, April 2001)

And of course, there's life. Team members went through personally difficult times throughout the research; Paula's son was hospitalized four times, and Darcy and Kate's partners both went through surgery. When practitioners engage in research, they add it on to their already busy lives. In participating in this project they were learning to do research, doing research and teaching. Being able to focus and keep the project a priority required commitment, flexibility and passion.

Constant Questioning: Practical Implications

A distinguishing feature of practitioner involvement in this project was their constant focus on the practical implications of the work. The data is full of questions asking, “Why do research? What new things did I/we learn? What’s new about this? Who cares? Who benefits?”

As instructors then, I’m not sure where we were going with the research and I’m not sure how the question connects to school. I started to have a crisis of understanding of what this project is... I lost sight and understanding of what it is we’re doing and why... When we’re looking at where adults with little formal education learn and I’m having a big problem now with that term, whom are we calling under-educated? ... So what is it that we want to know about these people? Those things they would never learn in school anyway, nor would we. If I asked Darcy that, where do you learn to knit, it’s not going to be in schools. So are we saying, how do people who can’t read to get that information learn? Because I can read the knitting guide, how do they learn to do things? I no longer have a clue what we’re going to be getting from people and how this group is any different than any other group. (Paula, March 29, 2001)

This constant questioning, kept the project grounded in practice. Team members, by questioning, pushed the research to yield a relevant report useful to practitioners and others involved in literacy.

Impact on Practice

One of the more discussed benefits of practitioner research in the literature is the impact of research participation on personal practice.¹⁹ Through practitioner research, the field benefits as the practitioners bring their learning to their daily practice. In our project we had several examples of this.

I got started thinking more and more about [the impact of research], then I began to totally rearrange my whole program based on the results of this research that we haven’t done yet...(Kate, August 29, 2001)

Our personal interest is how do they learn so then how does it affect the way we teach them? That would be our personal interest or a professional interest in this question. (Dee, March 29, 2001)

Various Hats

One issue that came up early in the project was that practitioners were taking on tasks that were not part of their usual job descriptions. In Kate’s words:

Doing research like this [in collaboration, applying for grants, etc.] implies several conflicts with my role as instructor at MUC. Everyone at the College personally supports my involvement in this project, as they have with many other “outside” projects over the years. However, the structure of the College is

¹⁹ See Kemmis, Stephen, 2001. “Exploring the Relevance of Critical Theory for Action Research: Emancipatory Action Research in the Footsteps of Jürgen Habermas”. In Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury (Eds.) *Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry & Practice*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

not set up for applying for grants or doing research to be part of an instructor's role. (Kate's Journal, 2001)

This was a particular issue for Kate because she works at the institution that hosted the project and was perceived as responsible for dealing with financial and administrative questions and responsibilities.

For example, after we first met at the Research Workshop and decided to proceed with applying for this project, I volunteered to find out if MUC would be the main College partner, and to find out if we could do it with no admin fee or only a small one. Thereafter, in the research team [as we came to be] I represented MUC in financial matters, although mainly I said, "I'll find out and get back to you." The leadership role in the team did not reflect the role I had at MUC in these areas, where I have authority over no money. My department head has to sign for even a book I buy at the bookstore. I think there is something of a halo effect here too. I am competent and am seen as competent in my area of expertise, teaching. I get a lot of points for doing "extras" like working on national projects or bringing in contracts. So because I have excellent teaching skills and have years of experience at the College, people think I can act in this other role with a similar degree of competence. I probably am influenced by this halo effect too. (Kate's Journal, April 2001)

Reflection: Applying to Research our own Reflection

Just as practice is influenced by practitioners' involvement in research, research is also influenced by the involvement of practitioners. This project would have been different had it been done by "academics." The team members asked questions that arose from their experience with the population we were trying to learn more about. During the October 2001 meeting, the team worked on data analysis. As we discussed what themes we should work with, it was clear to Marina that the four practitioner researchers were making discoveries based on their experience with and understanding of learners. More than once the four saw issues in the participants' words that Marina and Bonnie did not see. In this project, practitioners were regarded as value-added researchers. They brought their knowledge of the field to the research. But the benefit of their involvement goes beyond the traditionally assigned knowledge of the topic. As reflective practitioners they became good researchers. They applied what they know from experience to a rigorous process and created new knowledge.

Collaborative Research

"Collaboration" has become a buzzword. The term is used to identify shared activities among peers within and across different professions such as education and health. "Collaborative" is used to describe the relationship between teachers and students and also between researchers and research participants. For some the term refers to a way of working that is inherently good, for others it refers to a way of working that has both pros and cons. Other writers remind us that in the language of the Second World War, collaborators were traitors.²⁰

²⁰ For a description of the use of the term "collaboration" in the literature, see Niks, 1995. *Teaming Up in Collaborative Ethnographic Research*. Master's Thesis. University of British Columbia.

In the context of our project, “collaboration” refers to sharing control of the research process and involving all team members in all research tasks and decisions. We knew from the beginning that there were benefits and drawbacks to this way of working, but for all of us it was the idea of collaborating, of being part of a team, that drew us to becoming involved.

When we started work, although it was clear that we were all interested in being part of most of the research tasks, we agreed that each researcher would take responsibility for a separate piece of the work. These “mini-projects” would then be assembled into a whole. To ensure communication within the team, we agreed we would regularly share our results through face-to-face meetings and email exchanges. However, instead of developing different interview questions as we had anticipated, we decided to work together on one shared interview protocol. We started to share more and more research activities and the original mini-projects slowly became one project. Being part of the team was what was increasingly keeping us going and connected to the project. We pulled all the data to one database, where every researcher could read not just her own, but all the interviews and draw on them during her data analysis.

The ultimate collaborative task was writing, we wrote this report together. Although we had written into our proposal a six-day meeting to collaboratively write the report, we had expected each researcher would be analysing the data she collected and writing her own section of the report with one or two collaboratively written chapters or sections. We all agree that we never expected this degree of collaboration. We did not expect to share the data, the analysis and the writing as much as we did.

Team Structure: Roles

It was the team members from the start that determined the team roles. The four practitioners researched data related to the research topic question, and Marina researched data related to the research methodology question.²¹ Marina was also asked by the group to coordinate the project. The practitioners agreed that they were not prepared to do a research project on their own and they wanted somebody else to take on the coordinating tasks. As the coordinator, Marina arranged for meeting space, accommodation, conference calls, dealt with funders and made sure everyone was on task. Although implicit, the fact that it was Marina coordinating the project, gave the funders some reassurance regarding the rigour of the research process.

Marina’s experience as a research friend, encouraging and supporting literacy practitioners to do research, as well as her academic training in research methodology made it possible for the team to do the research at the same time as they were learning to do research. In other words, Marina was also the research “trainer” for the team. The researchers relied on

²¹ As mentioned earlier, Bonnie was the additional person involved in the project. Though present when the project started and interested in following the process, she did not want to commit to being a full team member. The team agreed she would come to as many meetings as possible to give us feedback. All team members except for Bonnie were paid to be involved in the project. Not getting paid, allowed Bonnie the flexibility to come and go without feeling she was letting us, or the project down. (However, Bonnie was paid by the Centre of Curriculum Technology and Training through the ALCSP when she worked to help us access literature as we were analysing the data.)

Marina to lead them in a reliable research process particularly when faced with hard decisions. These email messages from Darcy and Paula show how the group expected a response from Marina based on her research skills.

Marina, I think that your role as “leader” is one in which we should/could be learning a lot about researching. That is what I'm doing as I am brand new to research! This is a great learning opportunity for me. Darcy

Because of your experience and expertise in research Marina, it seems to me that you could see things... At our meeting in March you raised some of these concerns and we began a discussion. You didn't just let us “learn” the hard way, what the consequences of that agreement may have been for the project. You shared your expertise and raised issues we may not have thought of.
(Email from Paula, May 2001)

For some team members it was Marina's work and her views on practitioner research that determined their participation in the project. For Kate, the fact she had seen Marina use popular education techniques drew her to the training workshop originally. Dee had heard positive things from other literacy practitioners about Marina's work as research friend. Paula and Kate would only work on the project if Marina agreed to co-ordinate.

At the time of the project Marina was also writing her doctoral research, which focussed on the relationships between academic and non-academic researchers. She brought the reflections and questions from her own research to team discussions posing questions about the role of academia and academic research.

As we progressed in the research, some of the coordinating role shifted, especially towards the end of the project. While Marina was away for two weeks, Paula took responsibility for organizing the chapters and reading the drafts. At the same time, we looked to Kate for information about how to deal with editors and what expectations we could have regarding the writing and publishing process.

Communicating as a Team

As team members live and work in different parts of the province, we could not rely on communicating through weekly or even monthly face-to-face meetings. The biggest challenge we faced as a team was how to keep in touch with each other. Yet, it was through communicating with each other that the collaboration took place. Communicating with other team members was how the project manifested. The daily messages brought to life the existence of the project and of the team for team members who were taking on the role of researcher as an add-on to their already full lives. In this section we discuss the different modes of communication we used to maintain the connection with each other and with the project: face-to-face meetings, email and conference calls.

Team Meetings

Team meetings were held in Vancouver in March 2001, October 2001 and March 2002. In July 2001 most of us met in Edmonton where we attended the “Bearing Blossoms... Sowing Seeds: A Gathering about Research in Practice.”²² (Paula could not participate as she was looking after her son who had been hospitalized.) We scheduled the meetings for three to four days to allow time to coalesce as a group address each individual’s needs as well as the team’s issues.

Looking back, the times when we felt we were making the most progress in analysis and decision-making were the face-to-face meetings. These were times when we could focus just on this project not having to “steal” half hour from planning a class or from meeting with a student. Being together away from home meant that we could focus on the research together in a way that was impossible at other times and made all the difference to the quality of work we did. In Paula’s email :

It’s interesting the nature of the medium though as affecting us a bit because I guess when we come for weekends like this, we’re here, we mentally committed the time.

Though we recognized the enormous value of the face-to-face meetings, some of us felt some conflict at the ALCSP money going to support meeting expenses instead of going to programs or resources for learners.

Email

During the first team meeting, we discussed some of the anticipated challenges of electronic communication. We were concerned that team members, who are fluent and comfortable with email, could generate more messages than other team members were prepared to answer. We agreed to reply to anyone’s message within a week, at least for the first few months of the project. It was important that everyone felt they were heard.

If I’m posting a message I expect people to respond to it and if it’s a...public message, I expect people to respond to everyone. Otherwise I don’t see how we’re going to keep this as a team. We have to have a conversation... How do I know what effect my words are having unless you say something I can see you, right now. If I’m on email, I don’t see you; I don’t know what’s going on. (Marina, March 29, 2001)

Paula pointed out one of the drawbacks of relying on email. The volume of non-project email we all received each day was a further aggravation to our use of email to communicate with each other.

I’m living my life somewhere else and I get an email. It’s an invasion. Although we’re all committed to the project it’s uninvited... You’re there asking me something in a life that’s now full of other things. So because I’m committed to the project and to each of us, I want to respond to you but you’ve come uninvited... into my life. (Paula, March 29, 2001)

The volume of non-project email we all received each day was a further aggravation to our use of email to communicate with each other.

²² This Gathering was organized by the RiPAL network and the Literacy Coordinators of Alberta.

My course starts at 10:00 a.m. I go at 8:00 every day and it takes me until 10 to clear the email away. I'm resentful of the technology that allows that into my life. Two of the emails are from this team. They get saved but the two hours are gone cleaning out the junk and I can't respond thoughtfully to the two that mattered right now. (Paula, March 29, 2001)

As the project went on and we got to know each other better, our responses were smoother, more effective and more spontaneous. However, simply agreeing to use email did not remove the communication problems associated with it. For example, we had to come to an agreement about how to use the reply function as messages were becoming too long and confusing. We also had to pay attention to the message subject lines to easily access old messages and to pick up earlier discussions.

Although these logistics may seem trivial, they consumed valuable time and energy and if not dealt with, became a source of frustration for the team.

In retrospect, it would have been more effective to use First Class, the electronic network used by literacy practitioners for our electronic conversation. On First Class we could have created a project folder (a sub-conference) where our messages could have been saved, organized and archived for reference data for this chapter. Using a sub-conference would have helped to contain the conversation and allow team members to only open messages when we were ready to focus on them.

Conference Calls

Conference calls were also good opportunities to connect with each other in "real time." Although scheduling was a challenge because of our diverse obligations, we managed to have eleven conference calls over the project. Some calls occurred at 7:00 a.m. on Saturday mornings or 8:00 p.m. and typically lasted one-and-a-half to two hours or more.

For each call Marina prepared and distributed an agenda to the team in advance. The focus of the calls was usually to make decisions or to give feedback on material read previously. During the data collection and analysis stages of the project, responsibility for minute taking rotated among the team members.

Team-building: Relationships as Source and Location of Knowledge

During the first team meeting, we discussed the various expectations related to roles and ways of work that each team member was bringing to the project. Rather than assuming that responsibilities and relationships would somehow just evolve, Marina brought these issues to the team for our first discussion. We talked about the team environment we wanted to generate. A sense of trust, where we could share our feelings without "walking on egg shells," being able to speak openly without having to worry being politically correct, and a sense that we would be heard were all important. We agreed we would work on the assumption that we all liked each other and did not intend to hurt each other. We wanted to be able to deal with conflict openly rather than working around or avoiding uncomfortable situations.

One of the things we don't want to deal with is conflict so we're careful not to cause conflict and usually we do a lot of pussy footing around that I find often

wastes time and usually doesn't avoid conflict. When I took the life skills coach training, our instructor said, "You know you have to deal with the emotions sooner or later. If you deal with them now it'll probably take 90 seconds; if you deal with them in two weeks it's going to take an hour."...

It happened to me so many times in research teams that the conflict was left and left and left and once we brought it up it created a big discrepancy, it was huge. But then we came up, after that we came together so much stronger and so much clearer. These were the times that we all remember the most, those conflicts and the resolution time. Whenever you feel that something's bothering you or that something's just knocking on the back of your head and you just keep not trying to hear it, there's usually something important there. There's usually something that is crucial to your research and the process as a collaborative process here on the team, it's totally the same.

(Kate and Marina, March 29, 2001)

Having this discussion at the beginning of the project was consistent with an underlying belief that ran throughout the project—relationships are important in collaborative research. Relationships are the location of knowledge in collaborative research. Team research is qualitatively different from individual research.²³ When research is carried out by a group of researchers, decisions have to be negotiated; meanings have to be agreed upon. These processes do not happen in a vacuum but in and through relationships. Building relationships is therefore critically important. These ideas were discussed over email later on in the project.

If I am starting a working relationship with a group or a person, I'd rather have a "good" relationship because I think that then amazing things happen, like the ones that happened and are happening in our team. When I reflect on these issues, I can see that what we did in structuring the team affected the kinds of things we are now able to talk about and how we can challenge each other without making the other/s feel defensive, because we know it is not about the other person, but about ideas and pushing each other and the group further. I don't think we could've done this if we had unspoken issues. Could this have happened without us paying attention to the relationships? Yes, it could have. But maybe it wouldn't have happened. I'd rather plan and talk about these issues openly at the beginning of a team project and open the door to discuss any relationship issue at any time, than be faced with a bigger problem at some point in a project. (Email from Marina, December 7, 2001)

Hmm I agree I have learned so much about relationships but most of what I learned came from the bad relationship established or not established in another research group. (Email from Dee, December 8, 2001)

Pushing

The careful attention to relationships we built into the project paid dividends in how we challenged each other's ideas. We called it "pushing" because that's what it felt like. We felt we were doing it to and for each other, pushing each other to think further and differently. Initially team members understood the pushing as "correcting," or pointing at "mistakes." We did not stand up for ourselves and reflect on our perspectives. Later, as we kept at it, the team developed ways of pushing each other that made it easier to deal with it, mainly by warning the others that a "push" was coming.

²³ Niks, 1995. *Teaming Up in Collaborative Ethnographic Research*. Master's Thesis. University of British Columbia

When Marina "pushes" I tend to say OK that means I am going in the "wrong" direction, therefore I will quickly change direction so I am fitting into what I think Marina might want. I drop my original idea and try to do what is wanted. I find this interesting because 1) I do not think that is what Marina wants when she pushes. She wants us to think about it from all sides and to really know why we are "there". 2) I think this is partly why we are where we are re education. We learned early on not to waste energy and time going in a direction that was off the direct path to our goal. For me I can see that I am going to have to think differently for this project and to get the most out of the team input. 3) I like the way Marina warns us by saying OK I am going to push here. I think we can use that as an indicator that we are going to ask some hard questions but it does not mean we think the other person is off in left field it just means we are asking questions. And it does not mean that we want the other person to drop the idea completely or that we expect them to even make a change—we are just asking them to look at something more closely. OK Team—I am going to push here. It is your turn. (Email from Dee, April 2, 2001)

Training by Doing

Teaching how to do research is a contentious issue. This is particularly true when it involves teaching practitioners whose main interest in doing research is to impact their practice. In our case, teaching how to do research was also shaped by Marina's own stand on what is considered research. As she was articulating in her doctoral writing, research has been defined in terms of academic research. In her dissertation, Marina proposes that we strip the concept of research of all the values assigned to it by academia and that we work from a bare definition of research, one to which other sectors can apply their own values. The proposition is that there be three basic elements to a research process: aim to produce new knowledge, be rigorous and methodical, and be shared. As a result of these reflections, Marina constantly questioned what she was describing as research and consequently what she was asking team members to do.

As an educator, Marina struggled to allow team members to discover the best way of investigating the topic at hand. This is related to how Marina teaches and also reflects her current thinking about research, research methodology, and practitioner research. This approach worked at times. However, at others the researcher-practitioners demanded more direction from her. We shared our ideas as a team via email:

I am aware that I have a trainer role for this team, and as an educator, I do not want to tell you what to do, I want you to discover different and innovative ways of doing things. I hear you want answers and clear directions. And I am responding with questions and options for paths to take, and I am giving you the responsibility of making a decision. I am here to support you and help you see options, but I find it hard to "tell you what to do". I also realize that this may not be the best approach as the coordinator of the team of literacy practitioners. I can see the difference in how we approach tasks, and that is fine. I will try to be a bit more responsive to your requests, but I can't promise to tell you what to do or tell you the "truth" about how things work (I will keep it a secret!). (Email from Marina, April 30, 2001)

Because of your experience and expertise in research Marina, it seems to me that you could see things... that could be problematic... I guess I am asking you to offer YOUR concrete suggestions to things based on your expertise

Marina. I don't feel that anyone on the team will passively accept your expertise without deciding if it makes sense or not.... If it doesn't, the discussion/debate/process will continue. If we agree then knowledge has been shared without us (in this case) having to REDISCOVER something. (Email from Paula, May 1, 2001).

Return to the Dance

As indicated above, none of us expected the degree of collaboration we experienced. We built strong relationships among ourselves and as a team. We discussed the data, the participants, our views of education, teaching, government cuts and our personal lives. We opened up to each other and to the group in ways we hadn't anticipated. We came to know each other very well. This allowed for the team to support individual team members at different points and about different issues. Here's how Dee described it after a conference call in which each researcher chose what theme they would be taking over for writing it up.

I want to say thank you to the group for dealing so positively with my "angst" this morning... For me, this morning was a case of the group sucking me up in the vortex and coming up with a solution that works for me, and I hope for the group, much better in the long run... So what this is all about Marina, is I found the group dynamics this morning pretty amazing and very "advanced". I do not know a great deal about collaboration, but I suspect we reached some higher ground in the taxonomy of collaboration. The group knowing the individuals' strengths better than one of the individuals knows herself. (Email from Dee, January 2002)

Earlier in this report we offered the metaphor of dance to explain our relationship with the literature related to this project. We can now return to dance to describe the exuberance and joy we experienced through this project. We learned complex steps and built them into well-choreographed routines. We performed as an ensemble. While we worked harder at times than we may have ever worked before, we also cried together, and laughed together, often laughing until we cried, amazed at our own insights, passion and occasional ridiculousness. Our answer to the methodological question, how do practitioners do collaborative research, is a simple one. They do it very well.

Conclusions and Recommendations: How Do Adults with Little Formal Education Learn?

Conclusions

As you read about our participants and their learning, you found out about many things: how they learned, how their lives affected their learning, how agency, or lack of agency, affected their lives and learning, and the complex role emotion played in their learning.

The adults with little formal education who took part in our study told us about a variety of strategies they would use to learn a skill or find information. They most commonly ask other people, read, observe, try (just do it) and use some form of technology.

- "Ask Someone" was by far the most common strategy mentioned by participants. Some of our participants indicated that they would choose the person to ask based on the expertise that person had in the area, but many participants indicated they would ask a family member or friend no matter what subject was under consideration.
- "Read" was the next most common strategy and often it was cited either immediately before or after asking someone. Participants would read first to familiarize themselves so as to "not appear stupid". They would read after asking to go farther in depth on a topic.
- "Observation" allowed participants time to watch and analyse prior to attempting the task or skill on their own.
- "Just do it" required lots of self-confidence, previous success with the strategy and a very strong desire. Some also chose this strategy in a way that indicated a lack of critical thinking skills.
- "Use technology" (includes telephone, computer, television, radio and Internet) was also a strategy mentioned often by participants.

Our participants had a broad view of learning and of themselves as learners. They were aware of what affected their current learning strategies and some were aware of why they did not complete their formal education. Some told us how they managed their lives with out formal learning and others told us their lack of formal learning had kept them from what they wanted in life. Our questions were all related to adult learning, yet, as they told us their stories, participants told us about how they learned as young children. They mentioned the stressors in both their childhood and adult lives that interfered with learning. Many mentioned their school and school leaving experiences, as well as their first jobs as being part of the story of how they learned today.

Agency, or the ability to act in the world, appears to be a key factor affecting how the participants in our research project learn. Agency includes the quality of self-confidence, control over aspects of one's life, awareness of self, learning and life and the ability to reflect on one's experiences. Participants with high agency had more confidence in their ability to learn and employed a wider variety of strategies for learning than participants with less agency. Agency was not solely connected with formal education or lack of it, rather with factors outside the sphere of education. Agency can come from sources other

than formal education as all our participants had little formal education but their levels of agency varied greatly.

Emotions played a powerful part in the choice of learning strategies for participants in the study. For many, their comfort level with a learning strategy was more important than the efficacy of the strategy. While this may also be true of many people with more formal education, it powerfully restricted the ability to learn of participants who had little agency, and a limited social circle. The most frequent strategy our participants used was " Ask Someone." They were reluctant to ask someone if they feared the person would be sarcastic or unfriendly. Participants with higher agency, however, had developed the self-confidence to approach a wider range of people.

All our participants are adults with little formal education. As you read their learning stories and had glimpses into their lives, you saw what a diverse group they represent. Some are very skilled and have paid employment. Others are struggling to get the skills they need to get any kind of job. Still others have "given up" the struggle. But they all have developed strategies to learn. Some rely on strategies from childhood. Many carry emotional baggage related to learning. Most value formal education. They want their children to graduate. They would like to upgrade their own skills and they feel life would be easier with a diploma.

As we worked on this research, we reflected on what it would mean to practitioners, agencies and businesses that work and provide service to this diverse group of adults and to politicians, policy makers and the communities in which we all live. The following section provides our recommendations. We hope you will have many to add.

Recommendations

1. For literacy and adult basic programs

We were aware, as we were interviewing participants, of how similar they were to students who were in our programs. Hence, although the research participants were *not* in programs, we think that our findings have implications for adults with little formal education who come back to school to up-grade their skills.

- Use a friendly person, rather than print or recorded messages or on-line sites, to recruit students, since participants' most frequent learning strategy was "ask someone." Front-line staff should be trained in strategies to make adults with little formal education feel safe and comfortable.
- Acknowledge students' "baggage" from prior learning, which affects their learning as adults, and help students reflect on it and use that reflection to develop a sense of their own strengths and to improve their ability to learn.
- Foster and recognize non-academic outcomes of attending in a program, outcomes that build self-esteem, encourage awareness of and reflection on life and learning experiences and increase agency. Since people with higher agency develop more varied and more useful learning strategies, working with learners on increasing agency and self worth is a useful strategy for improving learning strategies.

- Take into account students' need for safety and comfort in the classroom, since emotional comfort and safety were important to participants' learning. Because students must take a risk to learn something new, the learning situation should be safe enough for them to be willing to take that risk.
- Teach Internet and computer skills since many participants said that using computers was an important learning strategy, but the researchers were not always sure how well they were able to access information on line.

2. For people interested in getting information to adults with little formal education (health professionals, police, government agencies, political activists, etc.):

- Maintain in-person services rather than computer-based or recorded voice services since the most common strategy of our participants was "Ask someone."
- Put an emphasis on being a friendly, approachable and safe source of information, and promote the service as such, since participants were more likely to ask someone they felt safe and comfortable with.
- Train staff in strategies to make adults with little formal education feel safe and comfortable.
- Use plain language print material in conjunction with a live person to give out the information, since many participants talked about using print, not on its own, but either before or after they had a chance to talk to someone who knew about the topic.

3. For people interested in social change:

- Work on eliminating false barriers to finding paid work for all interested adults with little formal education, since having paid employment correlates directly with having higher agency, and participants with higher agency showed a wider variety of learning strategies.
- Take account of the fact that not all early school leavers need or want school. Do not necessarily ask them to go back to school, but provide opportunities for them to enhance their learning strategies by sharing and using the skills and knowledge they have.
- Establish community information centres where informed staff will answer or investigate and then answer questions on a wide range of topics, providing information on whatever topics is of interest to patrons, and where needed providing help with tasks requiring reading and writing.
- Work to stop the attacks on British Columbia's social programs, attacks which threaten to destroy an environment that supports and values all its members.
- Work to create a safe, respectful society that clearly values all its citizens, regardless of the amount of formal education they have.

4. For further research:

- This research has scratched the surface of the issue, "How do adults with little formal education learn?" Knowing this, we think more research should be undertaken.
- Talk to more adults with little formal education, since we spoke to only 25 people.
- Dig deeper into the issues that, according to our findings, relate to their readiness to learn and their ability to choose and use learning strategies.

Conclusions and Recommendations: How do Practitioners do Collaborative Research?

Conclusions

In the chapter that addressed the second research question of our project, “How do practitioners do collaborative research?” we described how we worked together. There, we highlighted the areas that we feel will be the most useful to other practitioners attempting to engage in collaborative research. This report shows how those who design, carry out the research and report on the project influence the research process as well as the product of the research.

We were drawn to the project by the idea of working with each other and with the project coordinator. We found ourselves struggling to find time to do our research. The job situation of literacy instructors proved to be challenging for three of our team members when they had to carve out one or two hours each week to focus on the research question and our research tasks. We found it extremely challenging to find a separate time to focus on our research tasks during our working day. Only one researcher was able to take one course off during one term and use that time to do her reading, data collection and initial analysis. The other researchers could not divide their workload in such a way and ended up working after work and during holidays. Not having special office space and a clearly defined role as a researcher in our organization were added challenges.

Collaborative projects involving practitioners have the potential of yielding innovative and applicable data. Practitioners are not usually involved in research and when they are, they have the opportunity of bringing their perspective to the knowledge-producing project. By having practitioners involved, the knowledge produced is grounded in practice and can be passed on to other practitioners with an immediacy rarely found in other research projects.

We were drawn to the project by the idea of working with each other and with the project initiator. We learned to do research while participating in a research project that involved instructors in different parts of the province. We communicated almost daily via email s, every two months through conferences calls. Too sporadically we met face-to-face. We found these meetings to be the richest and most useful way of working together. The momentum we gained when we were together, everyone focusing on the project at the same time and without interference from our work and personal lives carried on for weeks after the meeting.

Although we were generously funded, we ended up working more hours than budgeted for. Research takes time, and collaborative research takes even longer because relationships, as well as meaning, have to be negotiated. Funding these types of projects, however, may prove to provide the highest returns for the money invested because it is the relationships that keep the project moving and the participants engaged. We wanted to do this research because we wanted to work with each other; it was not solely the research question we were interested in. Furthermore, because the focus of the research was outside of the educational system, we did not feel it directly related to our practice.

A lot of our energy and time was directed to working together, but, at the same time, it was the working together that kept us going. As we went further along in the process, we chose to collaborate more and more. Our team included four practitioner-researchers and an academically trained researcher. We found this model worked well for us. Some of us decided to get involved in this research on the condition that Marina be part of it; we feel having someone who is knowledgeable in research methodologies and open to working with others and willing to challenge traditional approaches to doing research, is truly useful. Overall, it was the support as well as the “push” from the other team members that we benefited from the most.

Recommendations

1. For literacy and adult basic education instructors who wish to engage in collaborative research

Having practitioners participate in research activities benefits the individuals involved but it also enriches the programs and organizations they belong to. Participation in research programs should be considered professional development activities and therefore funded as such by the program delivery institutions.

It is the responsibility of the instructors and administrators in the program to find a suitable way of accommodating the research activities of the practitioners. Program administrators should become involved in facilitating the research pursuits of the instructors and support them with finding substitutes, navigating the organizational bureaucracy, and creating a private environment for practitioners to work on their research.

Practitioners considering engaging in research should evaluate the impact such decision will have on their lives and assess what would be the best compromise for their own particular situation.

Practitioners will find that they are more engaged with the research if the focus of the research is one closely related to their daily practice. We therefore recommend that practitioners choose a question they feel passionate about, a focus that is useful and meaningful to them.

Some of us decided to get involved in this research on the condition that an academic researcher we knew and felt comfortable with be part of the project. We feel having someone who is knowledgeable in research methodologies and is willing to work with a team in shaping the process so that it follows rigorous research criteria but at the same time is able to be flexible and willing to challenge traditional academic requirements is definitely an asset in collaborative practitioner research.

2. For policy makers, funders and communities

When communities get involved in research, they become part of the knowledge production process. When they are not, we only have a partial understanding of the world

around us. It is therefore essential that research projects that include community members (such as practitioners, learners, program administrators, etc.) are adequately funded.

This project showed that literacy instructors are eager to participate in research and be actively involved in producing knowledge about and for the field. Communities should be part of this process and policy makers and funders should make sure there are enough resources directed towards facilitating their involvement.

Appendix 1: Participant Biographies

Some of the individuals interviewed for this report asked to be identified by a pseudonym in this report. Others asked that their own names be used. We have not distinguished which are which in the brief biographies provided below. We have mentioned their race or cultural background only if it came out in the interviews.

ALICE is a woman in her 30s with two children. She is on a leave from janitorial work at a hotel because of an injury. Although she did not complete high school as a teenager, Alice has taken university courses as a mature student.

ANN is a First Nations grandmother in her 40s. She tried to come back to school within the past couple of years, but family responsibilities got in the way. Her income comes from welfare and knitting.

ANITA is a single mother in her 20s. She looks after her sister's children. Anita's son is in a Native HeadStart program and she volunteers in the program weekly.

BRENT is of Irish heritage, was raised on the prairies, and in his 40s. He left school just before the end of his twelfth year. At the age of 36 he went back to school and obtained his GED and an Electronics Diploma. He now works for a large company.

BRUCE is a white man in his 50s. He has worked at a number of jobs throughout his life. Many of the jobs have been entrepreneurial.

CHARLES is white, in his 60s and born in BC. He never went to school because he grew up in an isolated area with no schools. His income comes from fishing.

CYNTHIA is a grandmother in her late 40s who lives with her daughter and two grandchildren. Cynthia has taken a number of courses and programs at the local community college and expressed a love of learning.

DAVID is First Nations, in his 30s and active in his culture. He dropped out of school in Grade 6, and went back to school briefly and unsuccessfully in 1985. His income comes from welfare and odd jobs.

DOUG is in his 50s and grew up on Vancouver Island, BC. He left school after Grade 9. He has never been unemployed. Doug is a journeyman carpenter.

ELIZABETH is in her 30s. She dropped out in high school. She is receiving welfare and is under pressure from her caseworker to go back to school, get some training and get a job.

FAYE is a mother of 12 children in her late 50s. She left school in Grade 8 after having been placed in special classes.

FRANK is a First Nations man in his 30s. He dropped out before high school. He has tried to come back to school on and off for ten years but alcohol got in the way. His income comes from welfare and work he picks up whenever he can find it.

HAROLD is a First Nations man in his 30s. He attended vocational school as a teenager.

JANET is in her 30s and a married mother of two. She is on a temporary leave from work because of a work-related injury.

JUDY is an Ojibwa woman in her 40s. Judy left school in Grade 8, but received her GED at the age of 40 and is currently hoping to get into a college program. Judy is presently on welfare.

KAREN is 19 years old and grew up in Northern BC. When she was interviewed she was planning to return to school to complete Grade 12. Karen is working and is single.

MARIE is in her 40s and grew up in BC. She has worked in a variety of jobs, mostly administrative, and takes courses regularly. She is married with four children.

PAT is a Cree woman in her 40s. Pat quit school in Grade 10 but received her GED at the age of 43 and has a full time job at a local woman's shelter.

PENNY is a Carrier woman, raised on her reserve, and in her 30s. Penny left school in Grade 8 in order to help look after her ill mother. Penny is still at about the Grade 8 level. She is presently on welfare.

SHAWNENE is white, raised in the Prince George area, and in her 20s. Shawnene completed twelve years of schooling and received a "Leaving School Certificate." Shawnene is unable to read and write. Shawnene has worked labour jobs in the past, but is currently on welfare.

TERESA is a Native woman in her early 40s. She lives with two of her children and Harold (see above). She is an adult with cognitive challenges and she was in special programs at school. She has a network of family members in the community.

THOMAS is white, in his 30s, and born in BC. He went back to school for upgrading several years ago, but the need to earn money made him quit. His income comes from sporadic welfare and self-employment.

TIMOTHY is white, in his 40s, and born in BC. He finished Grade 8 but dropped out after failing Grade 9 three times. He works in the skilled trades.

Appendix 2: Team Member Biographies

Marina Niks

I have been involved in research since 1986 when I became part of a research team that studied the socio-cultural needs of a semi-urban neighbourhood in the city of Buenos Aires, Argentina. It was during this project that I learned about working as a team and about involving research participants, neighbours in this project, as researchers in a truly participatory manner. Through participating in this project, I also experienced how research could be an educational experience for team members as well as for those who the research is studying.

In 1990 I immigrated to Canada and went back to school to do my master's degree where I worked as a research assistant in a collaborative research project that evaluated two adult learning centres in the Lower Mainland. This experience opened my mind to understanding relationships as the source, framework, and location of knowledge production. I became profoundly interested in research methodologies, specifically in collaborative ones. My master's thesis explores the implications of doing team research and uses the data from this project.

Since 1999, I have been working as a research friend for literacy practitioners in the province of British Columbia. As a research friend, I encourage and support literacy practitioners to do research. I have led literacy research workshops, consulted with individuals and groups, facilitated electronic discussions about research on an electronic network, participated in conferences, and assisted practitioners to write research proposals.

Being part of this project was my first time as the coordinator of a project, also an opportunity for me to implement a lot of the ideas I had theoretically proposed in my master's thesis about team research. I was scared and excited. Scared to screw things up, excited to be part of a team of amazing women, with great life as well as professional stories.

As we were doing the research, I was also involved in writing my dissertation. I found it hard to focus on my individual academic work, it was so much more fun to exchange ideas with the team and reflect on what we were doing as a group than sitting in front of my computer doing analysis and writing on my own.

From this project, I have learned to critically reflect on the role of research in practice, question my assumptions about the shape research has to take, the role of academically trained researchers in the field, and the role of practitioners in research. I have also learned from the team members about caring for the people they work with, about their experiences with trauma and poverty. I learned about respect for others and for their work.

For the past fifteen months we have been meeting and talking over the phone, emailing each other back and forth, discussing, agreeing and disagreeing, encouraging each other to learn more, collecting data, coding and probing the data, analysing, writing, analysing some more and writing more too. We have developed relationships that have grown to be

relationships of trust and cooperation. We have accepted each other limitations and strengths. When I look at the team's analysis of the data and the findings of this project, I cannot contain my pride and fulfilment. This has been a fun, enriching as well as serious and rigorous experience. We have come together as a group to learn more about how adults with little formal education learn and share our findings with the literacy field. We have done that and much more!

Darcy Allen

I am a 36-year-old mother, wife, teacher, and student of life. I have been teaching since 1987 and my experience includes many years of classroom teaching in both the public and separate school systems in Saskatchewan, tutoring both adults and children, and five years of teaching in an adult upgrading program at the Prince George Native Friendship Centre (1996-2001). I am currently employed at Quinson Elementary School in Prince George as the learning assistance/support/ ESL teacher. As well, I am the current and founding president of the Prince George Laubach Literacy Council.

I became involved with this project when I attended a weekend Research in Practice workshop in Vancouver with Marina Niks. I was invited to attend this workshop because I had done some field-testing for Evelyn Battell's project about non-academic learning outcomes. At the first meeting I met a group of women who shared my passion for literacy and I was amazed and excited by the knowledge these women had about both teaching and literacy in British Columbia.

The reason I joined the research project was to have the opportunity to both learn more about research and its implications for literacy and to work with a group of women who are well established within the literacy field. Working with amazing and intelligent women is always cause for excitement within me! When I entered this project, I was delighted to know that I had the complete support of my employer—the Native Friendship Centre—and that I would be given release time for my work on the research.

Unfortunately, the funding for my job ended and I was suddenly unemployed. I went directly to another non-profit organization to work for several months. In this new job I was able to work only 4 days per week and take one day for work on the project. I did not like the job; so, as convenient as it was, I had to leave. I took the summer off and enjoyed some time with my family and a week in Edmonton refuelling my excitement for literacy research. Since life is seldom just a smooth road, I had to have a major surgery in mid-August that put me right out of commission until the end of October. Once again I was looking for work and, at the same time, trying to keep working on this research project. Thank goodness for such an amazing and supportive team who continued to encourage me to keep on going. November first saw me take on an exciting full time position in a local elementary school doing a job that included a huge learning curve and that would not allow me time for this research. I feel that surviving this experience has afforded me many learning opportunities that influence not only the way in which I see my world but also the way in which I look at my students—both the children and the adults whom I tutor.

How is my practice affected by what I've learned by doing this research? I'm not entirely sure. I know that I am much more aware of the social implications of having an illiterate

community. I am much more aware of the fact that society marginalizes a whole group of society because of a skill they are lacking, but our society does not currently want to support this population to have an enhanced lifestyle. I guess that I am more awake to the reality that much of our society has a different way of looking at and learning about the world around them. So, where do I go from here? I think that I have discovered a lot about what it means to have practitioners doing research and that the research we do is indeed valuable and worthy of consideration by academics. I appreciate much more the job of academic researchers and the rigour that goes into their recommendations. I don't know if I'll "do" more formal research, but I appreciate the fact that what we as practitioners know will be a contribution to changes of our society if we share our knowledge in an effective and rigorous way.

Paula Davies

I have been working in the literacy field for 20 years. I work at the College of New Caledonia on the main campus in Prince George, British Columbia. I have taught in English as a second language classrooms and for 12 years I coordinated the college's one-on-one literacy tutoring program. For the past two years, I have returned to the classroom and am teaching English in the College and Career Preparation Department.

My involvement in this literacy project began in October 2000 when I attended a workshop on Research in Practice. During the workshop, one of the facilitators, Marina Niks, expressed an interest in working with a group of literacy practitioners to engage in a collaborative research project. I found myself instantly interested. Initially I was attracted to the project by the energy, enthusiasm and expertise of Marina Niks. I was intellectually stimulated by the ideas she was presenting. The thought of continuing this stimulation was appealing. I was also very interested in working professionally with the other participants who had also expressed an interest in Marina's proposal.

I have always liked to read about the work and reflections of other literacy practitioners and so the opportunity to contribute to that body of knowledge attracted me. And finally, while I consider myself to be very happy in the classroom, I have also always sought work-related experiences outside the classroom. I have been involved in a variety of Adult Literacy Cost-Shared Program projects and I have found that this involvement enhances the energy and expertise that I bring back to the classroom. I felt this research project would do the same thing.

During the duration of this research project a number of events in my personal life temporarily affected my participation. One of my children experienced a series of serious health issues that at times kept me from physically being present in our research work (The Gathering Meeting in Edmonton, July 2001), or from being emotionally present. Over the course of these personal issues, the research team supported me and the decisions I had to make at all times. They were always ready to alter their own plans to accommodate me and never made me feel that there was any other way they would have wanted to do it. Had this been any different I would not have been able to continue with this interesting and rewarding work.

Being involved in this research project has affected my classroom practice. In the first place, I used a Learning Theme unit with my fundamental class as a result of being immersed in the topic for this research. I explored with the students, their thoughts and feelings on their current and past learning experiences. This was an engaging theme through which to work on literacy development.

In a more profound sense, this research project sharpened my awareness of the important factors that affect peoples' lives. In particular the issue of agency, what it looks like, how people develop it and the significance of it has been brought into focus for me. I have had to articulate my thoughts. Rather than just "feeling" the significance of agency based on my 20 years of classroom practice, being involved in this research has required me to make these feelings explicit. As a consequence, I have become more committed to altering the social and political factors affecting undereducated adults' lives. This research has forced me to see the enormous role they play in affecting a person's agency and subsequent learning opportunities.

Dee McRae

Maybe I have been a long journey to this place where I am now, but if so I have only just begun to realize it. My dad was a teacher and I somehow knew this was not something I would ever choose to do. When I was four years old, I ran up and down the stairs in our house for him, sharpening pencils as he worked on his master thesis, *Characteristics of Grade Seven Failures*. Was this really my first collaborative research project?

I completed a BSc in Geography and expected the world to beat a path to my door. I had the perfect summer job, National Park Interpreter, "teaching" visitors about the natural world, but left parks to follow love and finally decided on post-degree training in education. Marriage, building our own house and building our family all happened in these years too, so for 10 years I worked as a "teacher on call" in Houston.

In my early years as a qualified teacher, I had some beliefs that have stuck with me. I believe in respecting students just as much as administrators, I believe if the whole class does not pass the test there is something wrong with the test or the teacher, I believe if at least a few kids do not get 100% there is something wrong with the instruction. But other beliefs, like academic learning being the most important thing, I have since given up.

I started in the literacy field in 1994. I really knew very little about life for the adult with low literacy, but found a student body so intent on learning and so motivated that they had *me* hooked on learning. The opportunity to join the Literacy Research Circle seemed to fit my needs; I would be able to expand my knowledge in the literacy field with a mix of academics and practitioners. Connections made through the circle brought me to Marina and the *How do Adults with Little Formal Education Learn?* collaborative project.

This project has reinforced many beliefs that were not yet crystallized for me. I pay more attention to student relationships and to feedback. It has reinforced my doubts about the system, which focuses solely on the academic side and only a few of our many intelligences. I try to make learning meaningful for my students and ask more and more questions about what I am doing.

Unfortunately, my dad did not live long enough for me to ask my questions. I always thought of my dad as someone who really stressed academic achievement. Now I am questioning that too. Why was he interested in the kids who didn't find success at school? Why research the losers when the system seems to care more about the winners?

So, have I come full circle and finished my journey? I have asked my mom to track down my dad's thesis. Maybe I will find the answers there. Or maybe I will find only more questions.

Kate Nonesuch

I have been working in the literacy field for 20 years, most of them at Malaspina University-College, Cowichan Campus, in Duncan, British Columbia. I have taught English and Math at all levels of Fundamental and Adult Basic Education, and have written classroom materials for fundamental English and Science. I am the editor of *Making Connections: Literacy and EAL Curriculum from a Feminist Perspective*.²⁴ My involvement in this literacy project began in October 2000 when I attended a workshop on Research in Practice. When Marina Niks talked about a group of literacy practitioners working together on a collaborative research project, I was interested for several reasons: I was looking for more opportunities to have research done at the Reading and Writing Centre where I teach; I like to work collaboratively; I was particularly interested in working with Paula Davies, with whom I had worked on a research project many years previously; I thought that I would learn a lot from working with Marina.

During the year and a half we worked together, several events in my personal and professional life influenced my work on this project. Family health issues, including major surgery, and the death after an 18-month-long illness of my teaching partner, Christina Patterson, meant it was impossible to follow the smooth research path that I had laid out. After Christina's death, I dealt with my own grief, the students' reactions to her death, and with finding and adjusting to a new teaching partner at the Reading and Writing Centre. The team supported me and granted me "time out" as I needed it to deal with these issues. We noted the parallels between our experiences in taking on a new and somewhat peripheral experience (the research) and our students taking on the job of coming back to school. Life gets in the way.

How has the research affected my practice? In some ways, it has confirmed and validated what I already knew. After our analysis of the data we collected, I am more convinced than ever of the importance of helping students increase their agency and their sense of having control over their learning; I know that the importance I place on their feeling safe and comfortable in the classroom is not just my style, that it affects students' ability and willingness to learn.

²⁴ *Making connections: literacy and EAL curriculum from a feminist perspective*. Editor, Kate Nonesuch. Toronto, Ont.: CLOW, c1996.

Bonnie Soroke

I have assumed the roles of student or teacher most of my life, beginning at a young age by “playing school” in our dark cement basement with some willing and some not-so-willing neighbourhood children acting as my students. Then as a bigger person I worked as an educator in early childhood settings, in an arts and recycling association, then in Japan teaching English.

When I recently returned to university to complete an undergraduate degree, I lucked into taking a literacy instructor’s certificate program, thus receiving my first introduction to the field of adult literacy, the theories of Freire, and issues of power in education. I embraced all three wholeheartedly. With a strong desire to know more about the adult literacy field, I spent the past few years volunteer tutoring in a variety of programs, serving on a community literacy board, observing many adult literacy educative settings, joining literacy organizations and online discussions, attending and presenting at conferences. During my present graduate work I have continued further exploration of the field through my thesis research at an adult literacy centre.

I latched myself onto this group with an urge to know more about the field of adult literacy and about research. And I wanted to learn from this group of women, a few whose work I knew or had heard about—Kate and Paula through their work with the CLOW research project about women in literacy and Marina through her work in collaborative research.

My roles within this group included that of learner, questioner, supporter, cheerleader, fly-on-the-wall, and ad hoc helper person. Assuming the familiar role of student learner allowed me certain privileges and also created some limitations. I did not have to assume any specific responsibilities, yet I also had no concrete role or connection with the process, other than my own interest.

As a graduate student in the process of starting my own thesis research in the field of adult literacy, I wanted to be in touch with people who were both working and researching the field. I had a strong need to understand similarities and differences between the research this group was doing and the research I was required to do as a graduate student. Some of that is outlined in the literature review discussion. I was intrigued and have much respect for the way they used their practice and experience during the whole research process of designing the methods, doing data collection, and in the analysis.

I also learned much from observing Marina in this process of responding to people, events and issues. She, being such a non-judgmental human, an experienced researcher, and a clear thinker, has taught me so much. I have become more aware of my own filters, of my presuppositions and how they need to be unravelled sometimes in order to more clearly understand some issues. I feel very lucky to have shared the struggles and frustrations, the laughter and the discoveries. Thanks oodles to everyone for allowing me the space to learn with you.