



**A Framework
to
Encourage and Support
Practitioner Involvement
in
Adult Literacy Research in Practice
in Canada**

Jenny Horsman and Mary Norton

**A Framework
to
Encourage and Support
Practitioner Involvement
in
Adult Literacy Research in Practice
in Canada**

**Prepared for the
National Literacy Secretariat
by
Jenny Horsman and Mary Norton
February 1999**



For information, contact:

mary_norton@aaal.ab.ca
jenny@jennyhorsman.com

This copy printed by:

The Learning Centre Literacy Association
10116 - 105 Avenue
Edmonton, AB
T6G 0W6

780-429-0675



CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Research in Practice	2
Supports for Research in Practice	3
Support to Engage with Others: Research in Practice Circles	4
Working Conditions, Time and Money	4
People Support	5
Accessing, Publishing and Disseminating Research	6
Educational Opportunities	7
Workshops/seminars	
Courses	
University study	
Technical Support	10
Research in Practice Networks	10
Elements	11
Network hub	
Personnel	
Membership	
Electronic communication	
Resource providers	
Research in practice circles	
Sponsoring and locating networks	12
Links among networks	13
Initiating networks	13
Engaging in Research in Practice Circles	13
Reading and Responding to Research	14
Activities	
Supports	
Reflecting on Practice	15
Activities	
Supports	



Doing Research about Practice
Activities
Supports

Issues and Challenges 17

Appendix. Research in Practice in Canada 21

Introduction

*... research — I assumed I couldn't understand a word they said. Now I know I can talk about it, understand the terminology. I have confidence in how I understand it. I'm not afraid of research; I used to be afraid, but now I am interested and excited.*¹

A practitioner-researcher made this comment towards the end of a year-long project to encourage and support research in practice. Like others in the project, she had viewed research as a world apart from her daily work in a literacy program. By reading research, doing research herself, and talking with others about research, she began to see the possibilities of research in practice.

Research in practice offers avenues to build and strengthen connections between research and practice with a view to improving practice, building knowledge, extending or shifting perspectives and informing research and policy. Systematic support for research in practice is central to building that connection.

Since the mid-1980's, there have been some adult literacy research in practice activities in Canada, including initiatives to build networks and other support for research in practice. Some of these activities are outlined briefly in the Appendix. Although this list is not exhaustive and reflects our experience and locations as two Anglophones based in Ontario and Alberta, we offer it as a beginning description of the context for developing approaches to support research in practice.

We also write with an understanding that the basic working conditions of practitioners are a crucial factor in enabling or limiting possibilities for research in practice to take place. In order for practitioners to read research studies and reflect, carry out research and make changes as a result of research, they need suitable working conditions, paid time to engage in research in practice, and opportunities and support to implement changes. More important, in order for practitioners to commit mental and emotional energy to the demanding tasks of research in practice, they need opportunities for long-term, stable employment in the adult literacy field.

¹ Quotes used in the paper are from discussions of participants in a research in practice project in Alberta.

Current working conditions for many adult literacy practitioners present many limitations for research in practice, but the recent attempts to build research in practice activities and networks suggests that there is also interest in developing the circumstances to support research in practice in Canada. In this paper we describe a framework and some concepts for creating such support. To write the paper, we have drawn from our experiences as researchers, practitioners and practitioner-educators. It is not our intention to provide a “blueprint” or single model for supporting research in practice. Rather, we hope this paper will encourage discussion and action about planning and implementing support systems that are appropriate to various local contexts.

Research in Practice

Practitioner research, action research, practitioner inquiry, program-based research, field research and a range of other terms are used to name how practitioners engage in research or inquiry about practice. Whatever term is used, engaging in research presumes some forms of reading and reflection before, during and after research — usually as adjuncts to doing research. We use the term research in practice to include a range of ways that practitioners might engage in research, but also to explicitly identify reading and reflection as important ways for practitioners to engage with research. Research in practice includes:

- reading and responding to research
- reflecting on practice in light of research
- applying research findings to practice
- doing research about practice

We think it is particularly important to include reading and reflecting as part of research in practice. Although plans to encourage practitioner research are often met with interest, few practitioners regard themselves as people who carry out research.² The process of reading and reflecting on research disseminates research to the field and ensures its influence on practice. It can also introduce practitioners to research as preparation to engage in research themselves.

² The history of attempts to develop a program-based research network in Ontario, illustrate the problem. Over several years many people sought to develop a research network, but in spite of substantial practitioner interest in the concept of research, only very few actual research projects were generated.

Reading and reflecting also offers possibilities for increasing links between different forms of research and different locations of researchers, whether primarily engaged in practice or in the academy. Structures which support practitioners reading and reflecting on a broad range of research can help to make such work more accessible to the field and increase the discussion about varied forms of research and its potential contributions.

While our focus is on practitioner researchers, we see academic researchers as vital participants in research in practice. Experienced researchers, whether located in the field or the academy, can provide support for research in practice through mentoring and writing, collaborative research with practitioners, and through their own research about practice. The involvement of a variety of researchers also increases links between different forms and locations of research. Goals of research in practice include linking research and practice and promoting dialogue about the roles and importance of various forms of research.

Supports for Research in Practice

A coordinated system of support for research in practice, including links to research and researchers can invite and enable practitioners to engage with research in a range of ways. Supports and links include:

- support to engage with others: Research in practice circles
- adequate working conditions, time and money
- people support
- accessing, publishing and disseminating research and related readings
- educational opportunities
- technical support

Two structures are key to providing these support and links: research in practice circles and research in practice networks. Research in practice circles enable practitioners to engage with others and access support through the research in practice networks. Research in practice networks provide an overarching structure to coordinate support, create links, and build opportunities for, and interest in, research in practice.

Support to Engage with Others: Research in Practice Circles

I get energy from the group. It helps to hear what others are doing. I feel like I can do it... There are so many competencies in the group — if someone is weak in one area, there is enough in the group.

When a group of research in practice facilitators were asked about supports for research in practice, the first response was “other people”. Being able to talk, listen, observe, and learn—to share and build knowledge through interaction with others—is a cornerstone of research in practice support. A study circle format, which we are calling research in practice circles, can provide an avenue for this support.

A research in practice circle would include practitioners who make regular contact with each other about research in practice matters. Contact may be through computer-based communication (see “support for research in practice”), telephone contact, face-to-face meetings, or any combination of these. The formation of circles could be coordinated through research in practice networks; membership in a circle would include membership in a network, and practitioners who join networks could be referred to a relevant circle.

Circles can be organized in relation to physical location (e.g., program or agency; city, town or region); or themes (e.g., reading processes, learner participation, critical pedagogy). For example, a group of practitioners in one program or in one city may choose to meet face to face once a month, with optional telephone or electronic communication between meetings. Practitioners who live at a distance from each other might connect electronically, and have periodic face to face meetings. As a variation on this model, practitioners could use electronic communication and arrange to meet face to face in conjunction with other regional or provincial meetings. Some people may opt to communicate entirely by electronic means, linking with others according to interest.

Working Conditions, Time and Money

Working conditions that encourage practitioners to engage in reflection and research include such aspects as long-term adequate funding, full-time jobs, adequately staffed programs, long-term and permanent contracts. Such conditions are crucial for practitioners to envisage

themselves remaining in the field over time and thus to feel interested in investing time and energy in reading, reflection or research. If the conditions of work leave practitioners struggling to cope and quick to burn out, few practitioners will be able to take opportunities to carry out research or imagine that they could make changes if they did learn from research.

In addition to adequate working conditions, practitioners need release time or funding to “buy” time in order to engage in discussion, reading, reflection and research. As well, practitioners may need funding for the following:

- access to the Internet
- travel (to workshops and courses, to review and borrow resources, to meet with a research mentor)
- telephone
- books, journals and photocopying
- grants for research project expenses
- grants for leave/sabbaticals to do research

Practitioners who have professional development benefits may be able to apply these benefits to support research in practice. However, for many practitioners, grant support from outside their programs would be needed. Access to grant support could be made available through research in practice networks and/or professional organizations. Networks or organizations could apply for funding to provide grants to programs for research in practice projects and administer their disbursement. Administration would include the development of criteria for grant disbursement, informing network members about grants, receiving grant applications, and monitoring and evaluating grant use and benefits.

People Support

People with experience and knowledge about research, literacy and literacy practice are crucial resources when inviting people into research and for providing support during the research process. In addition to colleagues in research in practice circles, people resources include:

- mentors or advisors to help people do research
- workshop leaders/facilitators
- practitioners or researchers with an extended knowledge of a topic
- people to facilitate research in practice circles

Mentors and advisors include experienced practitioner researchers and academic researchers. For example, in an Alberta research in practice project, an established academic researcher coordinated support for the practitioner researchers, while she and an experienced practitioner-researcher provided mentoring support. It is hoped that practitioner researchers who were involved in this project will eventually serve as mentors for other practitioner researchers.

Accessing, Publishing and Disseminating Research

A wide variety of print and on-line reading material would be necessary to support research in practice. Materials might include:

- research reports, theses and articles about literacy themes
- materials about how to do research
- data bases to facilitate access to readings
- topical reading packages
- materials about how to facilitate research in practice circles

The literacy field can be strengthened by practitioners having access to research reports and opportunities to discuss and reflect on implications of research for their practice, as well as opportunities to make changes and improve their practice as a consequence of this learning. Theses and similar research studies may be particularly relevant to practice as they are often generated out of reflection on practice by practitioners enrolled in graduate studies. However, the influence of these works on literacy practice is diminished, as they are not easily accessible outside of university libraries. Arrangements to enable practitioners to access theses could be made through research in practice networks, and research in practice circles could provide support to read them (see “Engaging in research in practice circles”).

As well as access to research reports, practitioners need opportunities to publish articles and reports about research and present research findings in person and on line so that they will be widely accessible, not only within local networks, but also nationally and internationally. Some ways to access and disseminate research and related materials include:

- reports of research on the Internet e.g., posted on NALD
- research in practice conferences

-
- research presentations at professional literacy conferences
 - Occasional Paper series (digests of research; review of key issues in a theme, or a collection of reprints of articles on a theme)
 - collections of research in practice coming out of research in practice circles.
 - reports in available journals or newsletters
 - an innovative Research in Practice journal

Currently there are limited possibilities in existing journals or newsletters for publishing research articles or reports. Local practitioner-oriented newsletters could be expanded to include digests on research. Although various international journals provide space for research to be reported more fully, journals are usually expensive, and so usually available only at university libraries. There are currently few, if any, forums that include articles on research that are read by practitioners.

A new accessible Research in Practice journal could include research articles by both academic researchers and practitioner researchers, as well as invited commentary by practitioners and researchers exploring the relevance of research to practice. Such a journal, available on line and in print (for free or at a limited cost) might increase the readership of materials on research. As well, a Research in Practice journal could build links and encourage dialogue between academic researchers and practitioners, in particular practitioner researchers.

The proposed journal could meet standards of a scholarly journal by being refereed. However, refereeing could be carried out both by academics and by practitioners. Such a process would avoid entrenching hierarchies between the academy and the field, recognize the importance of knowledge from both locations and link research and practice. An honorarium might be necessary to make it possible for practitioners (and academics) to free up time for refereeing articles and providing commentary on the implications for practice.

Educational Opportunities

Research in practice leads into and out of other forms of professional development, including professional development that encourages critical reflection on practice. For example reading or taking a course or workshop on a particular topic may lead a practitioner to pose or clarify questions for research. Completing a research project may lead a practitioner to extend her/his knowledge through reading, workshops or courses or enrolling in graduate study.

A range of educational opportunities can increase access to research in practice. Research in practice networks might organize workshops, seminars and courses, encourage organizations and universities to offer needed courses, and help network members to access university courses.

Workshops/Seminars. Workshops are short-term focused activities that may be used, for example, to introduce research in practice, to train facilitators for research in practice circles, to provide direct support for doing research and to provide a venue for sharing and discussing the results of research. Workshops and seminars could be offered face to face or on line. While they could be planned for a single research in practice circle, they could also involve members from a number of circles. In either case, it is important that workshops/seminars be viewed in relationship with circle activities.

For example, practitioners who are curious about research in practice may attend a workshop to “find out what this is all about”, then join a research in practice circle. Practitioners who are about to undertake research could attend a workshop led by experienced researchers about clarifying questions and planning how to collect information. Following the workshop, practitioners might continue to communicate with each other (and possibly with the workshop leader), through their circles.

Courses. Support for research in practice could be provided through access to courses offered over a period of time. Such courses could enable a group of practitioners to learn to read research studies, learn about doing research, and subsequently carry out a small research study. Courses could be organized by professional associations or networks, possibly in collaboration with a university so that participants could obtain university course credits, if desired. Creative and flexible negotiation between networks or professional associations and universities could enable such collaboration.

Courses could be offered face to face or on line. One example is a course on participatory practices which was offered by the University of Alberta in relation to a research in practice project. (See the appendix for more information about this project.) The course was presented through a series of on-line modules. All course participants read articles about participatory practices, engaged in on-line and face-to-face discussion about the readings, and completed a course project. Project participants also accessed a series of on-line modules about research and continued on-line communication after the course was finished.

The “Building the movement” course, previously offered by the Metropolitan Toronto Movement for Literacy, also provides a model for introducing research. The year-long course included an introductory block of classes to introduce themes. Participants then carried out projects with the support of a group of course participants, access to the instructors, and an interim check-in to present unfinished work. The course ended with a public presentation of the projects, and course products were made available to the field through housing them in a literacy library. While this course did not focus on research, a similar model could introduce practitioner research, support novice researchers and provide a way to make the resulting research available to others.

University study. Some practitioners enrol in university courses when they are looking for opportunities to read, reflect and carry out research about practice. However, opportunities to pursue in-depth study in adult literacy at Canadian universities are limited.³ While a number of universities do offer one or two courses in adult literacy, these courses are usually “generic” adult literacy or adult basic education in order to introduce the area and to draw in enough students. No Canadian universities offer a major specialization in adult literacy at the graduate level; those that do offer adult literacy courses usually only have one professor specializing in the area. Courses may not be offered every year because of insufficient students and practitioners who do enrol at a local university may not find a community of practitioner/students to engage with about literacy research, reflection and practice.

On-line courses, seminars and research in practice circles could increase access to more varied courses for practitioner/students and support in-depth discussion about research and practice among practitioners, university students and university based researchers. Universities could be encouraged to offer on-line courses in adult literacy, with arrangements for students from different universities to enrol for credit. With cooperative planning and provision of courses, students would have access to a broader range of courses on adult literacy offered by a variety of universities and professors. Such cooperative programming could ensure adequate numbers of students to maintain courses. As well, more specialized courses could be offered to support in-depth study with a particular focus.

³ Information about university courses on adult literacy is from an informal survey.

On-line research in practice circles and seminars available to university students in a range of locations could create communities of scholars engaged in reading, reflection and research on adult literacy issues. Such a community might support students in drawing out the implications and applicability to literacy practice of a wide variety of courses, including those which do not focus explicitly on the adult literacy context.

In order to create such varied opportunities for research in practice and to build communities of researchers, there need to be means for students to enrol in and gain credit for courses offered by different universities. As well, professors may need support to participate in research in practice circles, to generate web-based courses and to work with external students on line and through conferencing options.

Technical Support

Practitioner researchers might need access to a variety of types of technical support to enable them to make use of resources.

- help to use computer-based conferencing
- help to use on-line resources such as data bases and web-sites
- help to access university library resources
- help to access university courses

Research in Practice Networks

Research in Practice Networks are a way to coordinate access to and the creation of resources and activities to support research in practice in a province or region. Networks could be organized regionally, for practical purposes (e.g., links with universities, different contexts, face-to-face training) but would have flexible boundaries and open memberships so that members within one network could participate in activities and communicate with members of other networks. Resources could be shared among networks. While the actual organization of networks would depend on local context, networks could include the following elements:

- Network hub
- Personnel
- Membership
- Electronic communication
- Resource providers
- Research in practice circles

Elements

Network hub. This would include:

- a physical location, to house network personnel, some resources, and perhaps research/study space for practitioner researchers
- an electronic location, which would be the main access point for most network participants

Personnel. This would include core staff to develop the network and to coordinate network activities and access to resources, as well as people who might be contracted to develop resources or facilitate circles or workshops.

Responsibilities of core staff could include:

- working with an advisory group or board, representing the various network elements
- ensuring the development of a vision, policy and procedures to guide network development and activities
- arranging for involvement of the various elements in a network
- promoting network resources and activities
- enabling development of research in practice circles and referring members to them
- ensuring that network activities and resources are developed and made available to members
- encouraging the development of broad representation, sub-networks within a regional network, or separate networks, as appropriate in each context, to support research and reflection capacities among specific linguistic and cultural sectors
- ensuring the evaluation of network developments and activities and ensuring that evaluation recommendations are addressed
- developing proposals for funding as required
- receiving applications and distributing grants to practitioners

Membership. Membership would be open to anyone interested in research in practice, including a wide range of agencies and individuals in a variety of locations. Flexibility would be crucial for members to be able to participate in elements that interest them and members could connect to the network in a variety of ways. For example, they might participate in research in practice circles, attend workshops or do research under a grant. In order to ensure that networks are inclusive,

supports would be needed to make them accessible to all who were interested in participating.

Electronic communication. The First Class conference system, used by Literacy BC and the Alberta Association for Adult Literacy is one example of an electronic communication system linking network participants. AlphaPlus in Ontario is another. Choice of system would likely reflect local practices. However, as networks are developed, facilitating communication among networks would be a consideration in selecting communication systems.

Resource providers. Physical and electronic resources and activities could be provided through arrangements with universities (libraries, courses, researchers); professional organizations (workshops, institutes, libraries); and data-base providers (NALD, ERIC).

Research in practice circles. Research in practice circles within a network's area would be key elements of a network. Each circle could have an electronic location (e.g., a folder within the First Class Conference system). Members of a circle could request private access to their conversations but could also arrange to communicate with other circles.

Sponsoring and Locating Networks

The ways in which networks are sponsored and located would vary according to contexts and leadership. One factor to consider is how sponsorship and location would promote linkages between the literacy field/practitioners and universities/researchers. For example, a network could be jointly sponsored by a literacy program and a university, or by a literacy organization in partnership with a university or universities.

Network staff could be based in a program or other literacy organization, with an office at a university. Being based in a program or literacy organization would situate the network in the field and make it easier for the coordinator to maintain contact with adult learners as well as with other practitioners. A university base would facilitate communication and access to resources at that level and consolidate links between research in practice initiatives.

Links Among Networks

As networks are developed in various regions, they might link in a number of ways, including:

- sharing resources (e.g., reading packages, research training)
- sharing and publishing findings from research projects (print and online)
- sharing and cooperating in presenting training activities
- linking members
- coordinating/organizing conferences
- documenting and evaluating processes
- providing promotion and advocacy for research in practice
- undertaking research about research in practice

Initiating Networks

Network initiation in a region would need to account for a number of contextual factors. Where efforts to support research in practice are underway, partners might seek funding to build on those efforts, extend partnerships and develop a vision and implementation plan. Such a plan would include network sponsorship, an advisory group, network elements, staffing and funding needs, and sources of cash and in-kind funding (see the section on issues and challenges for further discussion about funding).

In other areas, grants to introduce research in practice concepts and develop partnerships might be a first step towards imagining a research in practice network.

Engaging in Research in Practice Circles

In the following we describe how practitioners might engage in research in practice, through research in practice circles and with access to a range of other supports coordinated by research in practice networks. The research in practice circle format is important to support practitioners in allocating adequate time to read research studies, reflecting on the applicability of research to practice, changing practice in the light of research and planning and doing research themselves.

Reading and Responding to Research

Reading and responding to research introduces practitioners to research as a first step to relating research and practice. Whether practitioners do research themselves or not, the literacy field can be strengthened by practitioners having access to research reports, opportunities to discuss and reflect on implications of research for their practice, and opportunities to make changes and improve their practice as a consequence of this learning. Activities that support practitioners in reading and responding to research also help to create an inquiry stance and encourage practitioners to reflect on their practice and plan research themselves. Reading research also introduces practitioners to research processes, which they may later use themselves.

Currently research reports and studies are not easily available or accessible. Often practitioners feel excluded from research by the structure and language of reports and articles; theses and longer studies are often seen as too academic. Being part of a research in practice circle could help practitioners structure time for reading and reflection. Practitioners could also access support to learn concepts, vocabulary and strategies to read research and learn about research processes.

Activities

- reading and responding critically to research-based books or articles on selected topics about practice
- reading a thesis or other longer research study
- reading a series of articles on a topic

Supports

- time to read and participate in a Research in Practice Circle
- research in practice circle facilitators
- workshops and materials to introduce concepts and strategies to read and critique research
- reading packages (books or articles, with reading/discussion guides)
- web-based resources (e.g., web-based reading guides with links to resources)
- guest presenters (e.g., the author of a book or article could facilitate circle discussion)

Reflecting on Practice

It made you look at your practice....involving others, getting a better perspective on practice.

Critical reflection involves practitioners in assessing their practice and assumptions about practice, in light of information and perspectives accessed through reading, discussion and experiences. Critical reflection may lead practitioners to replace or reframe assumptions or perspectives.

Participants in research in practice circles could be encouraged to reflect on their daily practice by observing and reflecting on how the content of readings relate to practice, and whether this prompts or relates to questions for research about their practice. Reflection could also be prompted by systematic program observation. For example, circle members could observe each others' classes or other literacy work contexts, or use video or audio tapes to support careful observation and listening to interactions and teaching processes. Such material could also prompt new insights.

Circle members could also be encouraged to write reflection papers, leading to further synthesis of insights from reading, discussion, reflection and observation. These papers could prompt others to read critically and observe practice, as well as widening the readership of larger research studies and moving them into practitioners' discourse. A focus on reading and reflection prior to research may support practitioners in carrying out research that builds on previous research.

Activities

- observation of practice and reflection
- journal writing that relates readings and observations of daily practice
- sharing and discussion of journal entries
- reporting reflection

Supports

- time to observe and reflect
- time to read and to write in journal
- examples or suggestions about how to write a reflective journal
- avenues to share writing

Doing Research about Practice

It's a luxury to be able to do research, as opposed to everyday work. It is like writing a book—you need time, space. I wanted to do it, but didn't have time. It made me look at the whys. It was a good experience to do some of this—different thinking...

Research about practice is systematic, purposeful inquiry about topics that directly or indirectly relate to, and have implications for adult literacy learning. Research may be conducted in a range of ways, depending on the questions, contexts and resources. As with any research, research about practice needs to attend to and account for standards (e.g., ethical considerations, data collection and analysis procedures). Time and support to understand and carry out the research process is therefore crucial.

Research questions are rooted in practitioners' experiences but may be constructed and clarified through critical reading and reflection, through interaction and reflection with other practitioners, and through research in practice circles. While members of research in practice circles plan and carry out research on their own, the circles could provide a forum to present and clarify questions, access support for planning research, provide a forum to report on progress, discuss challenges and explore ways to address them, and report on results. Circle members might all undertake research projects within a theme area or might undertake very differently focused studies.

Practitioners might do research in the course of daily practice or might take a leave from practice in order to conduct research. For example, they might enrol in a graduate program with a research focus, or they might take a sabbatical from their daily work in order to do a research project. Some practitioners might engage in major research projects that are related to, but are somewhat different from or in addition to, their day-to-day practice.

Activities

- planning and carrying out research
- writing research reports
- sharing research results

Supports

- access to research handbooks (print and/or web based)
- workshops about how to do research
- research mentors (experienced researchers, including practitioner researchers)
- time
- grants
- access to vehicles to report on research studies

In order to provide support for practitioners, research mentors and workshop leaders would benefit from opportunities to discuss ideas, challenges and insights about research and the mentoring process.⁴ Examples of challenges include helping people understand research processes such as data analysis without taking over the interpretation, helping practitioners to develop complex analyses of their data, and supporting them in finding their own voices to report on their research.

Issues and Challenges

... even though parts of it have been tough. It's been a painful growth, having to struggle with a lot of stuff, time, balance, etc. It has been a very stretching, growth -producing process, difficult and valuable.

Frequently, practitioner research is praised as being valuable for the practitioner engaged in the research process but the products are criticized as being of less interest for others. There are many challenges in the research in practice process when it comes to creating good, quality research. But it is important to recognize that what counts as quality research is in itself complex and contested terrain. The value of different forms of research are often strongly argued, including differences between qualitative or quantitative approaches, and differences between more participatory, action-oriented approaches and more abstract and theoretical studies. A major shift in the arguments is offered by poststructuralist perspectives; rather than claims to elucidate a “truth”, these arguments recognize multiple and contingent or situated truths.

⁴ For an example of meetings for practitioner research mentors and facilitators see Pates, A. (1998). *Practitioners reflect. Views from a summer institute on practitioner research*. Durham, NC: Literacy South.

Poststructuralism points to the value of identifying various plausible accounts which may reveal thought-provoking complexities of discourse and meaning, questioning taken-for-granted categories. Whereas some approaches may stress the need for practitioners to learn correct ways to do research, poststructuralist approaches question the discourse of “correct” ways, as well as questioning who benefits by the hierarchies of knowledges thus created.

These critiques do not take away from the value of systematic, thoughtful, reflective research, nor the time needed for practitioner researchers to learn about and undertake such research. The practical constraints on much research in practice (limited time, money, resources), especially if projects are to be carried out alongside daily literacy work, may limit the innovative possibilities for this work. Novice researchers are sometimes taught simple “how-to” approaches to research, in order to make the task manageable, and the variety of possible forms is not explored in any way. This may lead to more traditional or conservative forms of research being taught. Varied opportunities and supports might enable practitioners to engage in a range of research, from simple brief projects to larger, more complex, and more ground-breaking research.

Some have thought that it is desirable not to make too grandiose claims for practitioner research because of its limitations. A practitioner researcher who spends a few hours a week on research may not seek to claim the expertise of a full-time researcher, and may be intimidated by the very idea of doing research. Consequently some choose to call this work “inquiry” and focus on systematic reflection. Although the strength of this approach is that it may free up practitioner research from criticism as poor research, and may also make the “research” task less threatening to practitioners new to research, a weakness is that it may entrench a division between and a hierarchy of “real” or academic research and practitioner inquiry. Opportunities for discussion about the various discourses of research and their impacts and the possibilities for research in practice would make the complexity of the issues more visible.

Unfortunately, discussion is not always easy across divisions and within hierarchies such as those of the academy and the field, or between different academic and theoretical approaches. All too easily, discourses entrenched in different locations reinforce divisions, excluding and silencing those who are outsiders. Academic discourse easily leaves those unfamiliar with it feeling stupid and deferring to those who “know”, or angry that it seems irrelevant and of no value to those interested in daily practice. Avoiding creating divisions, or reinforcing those that

already exist between the academy and the field, between “real” researchers or “experts” and the rest, will be a challenge requiring vigilance and openness to create more egalitarian interactions.

Just as there are political choices about the approach to adult literacy practice, there are similar choices about literacy research. As far as possible these choices need to be revealed, rather than hidden behind questions about “appropriate” method. Some may think literacy practitioners should engage in research simply to become better teachers, others argue it is important to claim a place and seek acknowledgement of value, alongside academic knowledge, for the knowledge situated in classroom practice. Creating possibilities for a wide range of research in practice can begin to open up the ground for questioning the potential of research, avoiding overstating the claims and exploring the potential value of all forms of research.

Opening the ground for questioning, however, assumes the possibility of dialogue amongst equals. Yet, another challenge in the research in practice process is the need to create discussion and debate working across differences of location, interest and power. Creating networks to support research in practice asks that universities, colleges, literacy programs and networks serving different communities work collaboratively. Acknowledging and negotiating power relations is crucial to creating egalitarian interactions.

The interconnection and conflicting demands between the expectations of various sectors for literacy research and practice can also create complicated terrain. Research in practice networks or research centres that are too dependent on, for example, government or corporate funding run the risk of being able only to carry out research that meshes with the funders’ initiatives and priorities, whereas those less dependent on such sources are at risk of having insufficient funding to carry out the research and networking they may judge significant.

A further political limitation relates to the lack of power of literacy practitioners. One person experienced in leading practitioner research projects identified as a key problem “where to go” when practitioner research identifies a problem that cannot be addressed within a program, institution or system as currently structured. In these situations researchers struggle with their lack of power to act on their research. Developing connections and dialogue so that findings of research in practice projects can have influence on policy development and funding priorities is crucial.

The value of research in practice must be recognized for its potential to improve literacy practice, supporting the field in developing and changing and exploring new directions and possibilities. This value of research could be lost if practitioners' involvement in research in practice became a criterion for employment, simply a form of qualification, or even become the basis of hierarchies among practitioners within the field. The value would also be diminished if conditions in the field become so closely regulated that there was no room for innovation and change in individual classrooms or programs. The challenge is for the field to be able to remain open to change and possibility developed from learnings from research in practice.

Appendix

Research in Practice in Canada

Some Canadian researchers and practitioners have engaged in research about practice since adult literacy became a focus for study. As well, training for literacy practitioners has often included opportunities to read research, reflect on practice, and engage in inquiry about practice. Examples include the Regional Resource People Project (Alberta), the Practitioners Certificate Program (Manitoba), the Metropolitan Toronto Movement for Literacy course for literacy workers, and a number of distance education programs organized by Educational Planning and Design Associates (Newfoundland). Currently, Serge Wagner (Quebec) is coordinating a project in which practitioners, other field-based literacy workers and learners are writing reflective articles about Francophone literacy in Canada.

In 1988 a Research and Practice Group was formed in Ontario, which sought to become a network that would influence the sort of literacy research that would obtain government funding, set research priorities and gain credibility for and support program-based research. The group (later called the Program-Based Special Interest Group, then the Literacy Field Research Group) held a well-attended conference, wrote a manual to teach practitioners to carry out research and led workshops to introduce it, and published articles on research in a series of occasional papers. Although this group continued until 1996, it was unable to create the conditions to support much practitioner research.

Since 1988, research has been one of five areas of NLS project funding. Such funding has supported a wide variety of projects. For example a Toronto-based literacy worker, Guy Ewing, was able to obtain a grant with the support of the Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy (MTML) and take an extended leave from his program. He studied theoretical literature and interviewed literacy teachers and learners to explore the incorporation of phonics into whole language reading teaching. The result of the study was the book entitled, *Don't Talk to Me about Vowels*, published by MTML. The project allowed the knowledge in the field to be systematized and made widely available. Members of the literacy community who participated on a project advisory committee also engaged in critical reflection on their own practice.

The National Literacy Secretariat also funded a national research project initiated by the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women

in 1990. A first stage examined how gender issues affect women's access to and experience of literacy programs. This initial research was designed to lead into a second action research stage where a team of practitioner researchers from across the country each carried out a "woman-centred" activity in their program and reflected on its impact with the support of coordinating researchers. They came together several times during the process to build a collective analysis of what they learned through the research process (Lloyd, 1991; Lloyd, Ennis & Atkinson, 1994).

In 1996, the National Literacy Secretariat hosted a Policy Conversation about literacy research. Participants in the conversation identified a need to recognize, link and support literacy research and practice. (Notes from the Policy Conversation and a listing of NLS funded research projects are included in Policy Conversation on Literacy Research). A survey conducted by Mary Norton and Yvon Laberge after the Policy Conversation indicated interest in practitioner research, but little systematic activity to support it in Canada. Barriers to practitioner research were also identified, including practitioners' concepts about research and researchers, working conditions and lack of time and financial support. One result of the survey, a Research in Practice Seminar, was held in Edmonton, in October, 1997. The 18 participants from across the country shared information and discussed possibilities for research in practice in Canada.

In 1998, the National Literacy Secretariat issued *Enhancing Literacy Research in Canada*. This document offered a "framework for the research support activities of the National Literacy Secretariat" and continued to recognize the value of practitioner-driven as well as academic research. At the end of 1998, a joint initiative was launched between NLS and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council aimed at enhancing collaborative research initiatives by literacy practitioners and academic researchers.

Since the Research in Practice seminar, some systematic efforts to promote and support research in practice have been implemented. In Alberta, the Learning Centre and the University of Alberta, Faculty of Education, undertook a collaborative project about Participatory Approaches that included a research in practice component. This project involved six literacy practitioners and groups of adult students in introducing or extending participatory practices in their programs. Each practitioner completed research about the participatory practices.

Over the course of a year, practitioners in the project read and responded to research and other readings about participatory practices. Through computer mediated conferencing and face-to-face discussions, they related research to personal perspectives and practices. During this time, practitioners were also introduced to research approaches and methods. They clarified research questions and used various methods to collect and analyse information. Research facilitators provided support upon request during various stages of research. Each practitioner researcher is writing a report to share research findings.

In British Columbia, Audrey Thomas initiated two meetings of practitioners from around the province in February and November 1998 to explore research in practice possibilities. At the November meeting, a research in practice team from Alberta came as resource people and presenters. Literacy BC included a course about action research led by Allan Quigley in the 1998 Summer Institute. Practitioners have been encouraged to apply for funding for research in practice projects through the federal-provincial adult literacy program as well as through the new SSHRC partnership initiative with the NLS.