

Action Research Project Summary

Literacy Outcomes of Community Interventions

Storytellers' Foundation

Hazelton, British Columbia

Research Question

How can we measure social capital progress among literacy learners? In what ways is social capital acquisition connected to literacy development?

Objectives

- Research and name competencies required for social capital
- Create a tool that measures progress in social capital development

Team Members and Roles

Project Manager	<i>Mel Sondergaard</i> , Storytellers' Foundation Overall project management; tool design; piloting with learners
Practitioner-Researchers	<i>Jane Boulton</i> , <i>Anne Docherty</i> , Storytellers' Foundation <i>Mel Sondergaard</i> Drafted literature review; wrote background supporting papers; designed tool
Funder	<i>Leona Gadsby</i> , 2010 Legacies Now Engaged in conversations about the current need to be able to clearly indicate what literacy programs are providing to individuals and to society, particularly in the context of a community development approach
Research Friend	<i>Marina Niks</i> , RiPAL-BC Provided a sounding board; engaged in conversations through phone calls, emails and face-to-face meetings whenever possible to provide feedback on documents, tools, data collection and analysis

Methods

The project diagrammed the action research cycle, explaining its methods in an easily understood fashion:

Reflect

Building our tool

- Recorded learning from tool development process and evolving drafts of tool
- Met as a team to discuss and analyze the findings from the tool testing. Tool testing informed our developing theory (March & May 09)

Building our theory

- Met to reflect on our learning as a team in Hazelton (monthly meetings)
- Had two face-to-face meetings (Dec 08/ June 09), and three teleconferences (Sept 08, Nov 08, March 09) with the entire provincial team to examine learning to date and to refine our theory and clarify our understanding.

Observe

Building our tool

- Analyzed the existing tools- found that the competencies we had named were not reflected (Aug-Sept 08)
- Met to refine drafts of rubric & learner tools. (Met 3 times Oct- Dec 08, Jan 09)
- Recorded observations and learning after each tool testing session (weekly Feb & March 09 and again May & June 09)

Building our theory

- Did analysis of the literature and local knowledge. Met to discuss as a team (Met 2 times Oct-Nov 08)
- Did analysis of testing data, reflections, local knowledge and literature. Reviewed as a team (Met 2 times as a team March 09 & May 09)

Plan

Building our tool

- Met as a team to start naming and identifying the competencies of social capital that we want to measure. (met 3 times Aug-Sept 08)
- Decided to create our own rubric & tools for learners to accompany it (Sept-Oct 08).
- Refined list of competencies to measure (met 2 times Oct 08)
- Modified the tool for the second round of testing (April 09).
- Modified and digitized final tool for use by other groups (June 09)

Building our theory

- Started by naming our context, practice and theories behind our practice (met 3 times in Aug/ Sept 08)
- Refined our theory and edited our discussion paper (4 drafts over Sept-Oct 08)

Action

Building our tool

- Surveyed other existing literacy measurement tools (Aug- Sept 08).
- Created 4 drafts of the social capital rubric and learner tools (Oct 08-Jan 09)
- Set up the tool testing process (January 09)
- Tested the tool for 4 weeks with a group of learners in Feb & March 09 (Group included 7 young adults in Community Development Learning programming at the Learning Shop)
- Tested the tool for 3 weeks with a group of learners in May & June 09 (Group included 7 adults in the Essential Skills for Work program in Gitsegukla)

Building our theory

- Explored what the literature said about social capital and literacy (Aug-Sept 08)
- Revisited local documents and explored what local knowledge contributed to the discussion (Aug- Sept 08)
- Wrote 4 drafts of a discussion paper linking local knowledge to theory (Aug-Oct 08)
- Continued review of what the literature says, continued review of local knowledge (March-June 09)
- Conducted a focus group with a group of adult learners to inform the theory (May 09)
- Wrote background document for the project to share 'container' and theory developed (May-June 09)

Challenges

- **Further development of the assessment tool needed.**
The tool is useful for learners as it gives them a map to build their awareness about new competencies, build a language, and set learning goals. The tool is also useful for practitioners because it facilitates conversations about the significance and aspects of these competencies. We found, however, that the tool is not yet developed enough to be more universal in its use. The next step needs to be the development of levelled indicators for each key competency so that the domain of social competency can be clearly placed within the set of fully portable skills that are identified as “literacy”.
- **Communicating literacy practice context.** The literacy practitioners work for the non-profit society, Storytellers' Foundation. Storytellers' has not been explicit in describing its context, conceptual frameworks or practice. This made it difficult for other team members to know how to participate in some of the project discussions. This experience has helped Storytellers' become more explicit about describing its context and practice.
- **Workload.** Like most literacy practitioners, those at Hazelton work part-time and are carrying a heavy workload. This project became immersed in other project work, which made scheduling phone calls or pulling in the research mentor and funder more difficult than anticipated. The literacy practitioners needed time away from project work to reflect on their learning and extract activities and research that were relevant only to this project. This took a lot of time, which resulted in less consultation than hoped for.
- **Difficulty in meeting.** The literacy practitioners live 1,000 kilometres away from Vancouver, where the research mentor and funder are situated. This geographic separation made it difficult to have regular check-ins and face-to-face meetings.

Findings

- The literacy field (this includes the Storyteller's Foundation's funder, Literacy Now) often focuses on human capital and less so on social capital. As a result of this project, the team has increased their understanding of literacy and broadened the way they define literacy outcomes to include both social and human capital development. This has contributed to increased awareness of how the development of social and human capital leads to the development of a healthy, vibrant learning community. Hopefully, this tool supports an ongoing discussion about the importance of social capital.
- The Definition and Selection of Key Competencies (DeSeCo)¹ project contributed to the team's understanding of accountability in adult literacy. The DeSeCo project recognizes that literacy must help a person develop capacities in order to make sense of the complex and changing world around them. The tool supports the role of community development in literacy progress, moving beyond an individual relationship between learner and practitioner. Literacy results in improvements to both human and social capital, which is vital for healthy and resilient communities.

Voices from the Research

The excerpt below is from a background paper written by one of the BC ART members:

¹Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations www.deseco.admin.ch/

- **Our work is interconnected**

In the picture book Zoom² we are reminded that everything is connected to a bigger picture. The book starts with a close up shot of a dark star like object that we learn (as we turn the pages) is the comb of a rooster. As we turn yet another page, it is easy to assume that the rooster is in a farm yard until we turn more pages and realize the rooster is in a child's toy farm set, which we soon learn is in fact a poster of a child playing with a toy set and so the story line continues. We zoom in close at the start and continue to zoom out to a much bigger picture...

- **Why we joined this project**

We hope that our research report will, like the book Zoom, help the reader understand about our context for literacy measurement in a (zoom in) remote-rural community in northwest British Columbia and its applicability to (zoom out) accountability and monitoring systems throughout Canada.

We became interested in this project because we had, for several years, been faced with a problem of how to capture and monitor literacy progress in learners (individually and as a group). We are literacy practitioners in a remote-rural, aboriginal community where progress in an individual cannot be separated from progress as a collective. We know that we are delivering learning programs to help individuals take their place in society. In our society and in many First Nations societies this means learning how to live and interact in reciprocal relationships.

Outputs

- A tool to measure changes in learners' attainment of social capital skills that is useful to both learners and practitioners, and takes into account the role of community development in literacy progress

Outcomes

- Our project has created opportunity for team members to have a conversation about the fundamental importance of defining literacy. Through this project we have started (and will continue) to explore a common language about the broader definition of literacy and how we talk about this definition.
- This project contributes to the ongoing discussion and debate about the importance of human capital versus social capital skills acquisition. As was discussed after the team's presentation at the October 2009 symposium, the acquisition of these skills should not be viewed as an either/or proposition; both are important in learners' personal growth and literacy acquisition.
- The funder is now more aware of the importance of social capital acquisition, especially for the learners served by this program.
- We followed a learning cycle of plan, act and reflect. We had not been explicit in explaining this cycle and we had not been explicit in how our learning informed our action. This project has helped us make this cycle explicit so that others can understand and share in our learning.
- The BC ART members will continue to build on their knowledge and the knowledge of others in the literacy field to create a measurement tool for social capital development.

² Zoom (Picture Puffin) Istvan Banyai. 1998