Literacy Outcomes of Community Interventions

Final Report

BC Action Research Team

Acknowledgements

Introduction

The Context
We became interested in this project because we had, for several years, faced 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. Our job as literacy workers is to support individuals as they develop literacy skills.

An essential part of literacy development in our community is to link learners with members of their wilp[1] in order to develop daxgyet[2]. This type of learning can only happen experientially and while immersed in relationships. We joined this project so we could understand what is missing from the measurement tools currently used in the BC literacy field, to learn more about place-based, oral and experiential learning and how it fits within a literacy context.

By using the BC Community Literacy Benchmarks knowledge, we are continuing a strategic partnership with government to promote literacy development. This project builds on the historical work of literacy practitioners in British Columbia. In project discussions, we were able to identify a number of initiatives in BC that are working on accountability. These include, but are not limited to, the From the Ground Up project, the BC Benchmarks project and an ACME guide to literacy development that shares reflections on, and resources for understanding accountability from seasoned literacy practitioners. This project is one small part of this bigger conversation.

The Challenge
The problem we had identified in entering this project was that we lacked a tool to measure literacy progress when working on projects that develop social capital. Since 1998 the Hazelton practitioners have studied social capital and its influence on the overall health of an individual and community. We began to understand that literacy is about building human capital (the acquisition of individual skills and knowledge) *as well as social capital*, defined as the development of social relationships and networks based on trust and shared values that ultimately foster community well being.[3]

---

[1] Wilp is the family unit of Gitxsan people. Each wilp has certain land and fishing areas that are managed by its members. The system is matrilineal – when children are born they become members of their mother's Wilp. The father's wilp has certain responsibility to each child. For instance, education of a child is the responsibility of the father's wilp.
[2] Daxgyet is empowerment. It is necessary to groom people to hold daxgyet. Daxgyet is the "glue that holds the wilp together". It is critical for a healthy society.
[3] Paul Cappon, "Measuring Success in First Nations, Inuit and Metis Learning," The Canadian Council on Learning, May 2008.

It is the interaction between human and social capital that creates the dynamic for the emergence of a learning community.[4] Over the past ten years we have begun to understand how important it is to foster capacity within individuals to build and sustain trustworthy relationships. In 2003, we completed a three-year community based research project on learning communities. In our final report we wrote about social capital:

> As human beings we are born into social relationships and we live in relationship with others for the rest of our lives. Our sense of self and a sense of community is formed through interaction with others. Through our conversations, and our reciprocal exchanges we develop relationships with others. These relationships in turn help us create a sense of attachment, a sense of belonging and a sense of communion with others. Like dropping a pebble into a pond, there is a rippling affect that broadens out the sense of community and our participation in it, person by person, interaction by interaction, relationship by relationship. ("Learning Happens Everywhere: Understanding the Learning Community and Learning Technology Intersection," Storytellers' Foundation, 2003)

Research Question or Problem

We entered this project because we wanted to learn how to name and measure learner progress in developing competencies for social capital. We started with this research question: *How does this tool show progress in terms of trust and solidarity among learners? More specifically, how does it provide evidence of literacy progress?* Our research question, however, changed during the project. We are wrapping up with the question: *How does this tool show literacy progress? More specifically, how does it provide evidence of progress in trust and solidarity among learners?*

Project Goal

The goal was to develop and test a tool that could name and measure literacy progress for learners engaged in activities that focused on social capital development.

Project's Connection to Accountability

First Step — Defining Literacy

The Definition and Selection of Key Competencies (DeSeCo)[5] project helped us understand accountability in adult literacy. The DeSeCo project recognizes that literacy is not about individuals developing a long list of disconnected skills but rather it is about individuals developing capacities that are complex and interconnected. Literacy must help a person develop capacities in order to make sense of the complex and changing world around them. After reading about DeSeCo we had more confidence in how we define literacy locally in our communities.

In the Upper Skeena communities we define literacy as:

---

[4] James C. Coleman, "Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital," *Journal of American Sociology* 94 (1988): 95-120.
[5] Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations www.deseco.admin.ch/

… much more than reading, writing and math. Literacy involves an individual making connections between the written word, one's own experience, and society. The end result of literacy should be to empower people to take their place in the community as individuals and as citizens. (*Breaking Barriers: A Model for a Literate Citizenship*, 1998)

Limitations of Existing Measurement Tools
This project has identified a gap: Typically, definitions of literacy focus on the human capital developed as a result of learners' involvement in educational activities. We define human capital as the skills and knowledge that an individual develops through education and experience. As a result of this project we have increased our understanding of literacy and broadened the definition to include social as well as human capital development. We used current discussions, knowledge and measurement tools developed in BC through different projects (From the Ground Up[6], BC Community Literacy Benchmarks[7]) as a basis of our knowledge about literacy accountability practices. We found there were aspects and outcomes of our work that were not represented in those tools.

Measuring Progress in Social Capital
Within this project, we have named competencies required for social capital. We are in the process of creating a tool that measures progress in social capital development. After this project, we will continue to build on our knowledge and the knowledge of others in the literacy field in order to create a measurement tool for social capital development. Leona Gadsby, the funder on our team, agrees there is a gap in measurement, especially around community development. We are confident that this project's findings will be useful in advancing the discussion around accountability in adult literacy, particularly in terms of understanding the relationship between the capabilities of individuals and the resilience of communities.

Potential to Improve Accountability
Literacy practitioners have worked hard and successfully to figure out how to talk about what they are doing so they can explain this to government. 2010 Legacies Now has played a key role in this strategic work. It, along with many literacy practitioners, understands that government needs accountability measurements. This project has helped develop a language around literacy development, particularly in the area of social capital. This language will help advance the accountability conversation between the literacy field and government.

The potential for impact in improved accountability in BC is strong because it is situated in current accountability conversations and development. In addition, we have a funder who is knowledgeable about literacy practice. This has resulted in practical discussion and relevant practice. In CtD's field review findings, extensive interviews led to several recommendations. Although all the recommendations

---

[6] www.ripal.literacy.bc.ca/fromthegroundup/default.html
[7] www.**literacy**bc.ca/Research/**benchmarks**.php

resonate with the BC team, our relationship with our funder underscored the following recommendations from *Voices From the Field:*

> ➢ Funding bodies should include knowledgeable officers, are experienced in the field, to work with the field in establishing priorities and procedures.
> ➢ Accountability should be mutual and reciprocal.

Team Members and Roles
Our team changed over the course of the project. We began this project with three practitioners from Hazelton in Northwest British Columbia, a research mentor and a funder from Vancouver, British Columbia. One of the practitioners from Hazelton eventually left the project in an official capacity.

The two Hazelton *practitioners* who remained with the project had both distinct and shared roles. One practitioner was the project manager and also tested the tools with learners. The other practitioner reviewed the literature and took on the writing of background papers and describing the context for our project. Both practitioners (along with the third before she left) designed the tools.

The *research mentor* served as a sounding board, engaging in conversations through phone calls, emails and face-to-face meetings whenever possible to provide feedback on documents, tools, data collection and analysis.

The *funder* engaged in conversations about the current need to clearly indicate what literacy programs are providing to individuals and to society, particularly in the context of a community development approach.

Team Challenges
An initial challenge was around inclusion of team members. Several factors contributed to this challenge:

> ➢ Storytellers' Foundation was the lead organization on this project. The literacy practitioners both work for this non-profit society. Storytellers' is an organic, citizen-led organization. We have not been explicit in describing our 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 helped Storytellers' become more explicit about describing its context and practice.

> ➢ The Hazelton practitioners, like most literacy practitioners, work part-time and carry a heavy workload. This made scheduling phone calls or pulling in the research mentor and funder more difficult than anticipated. The literacy practitioners needed time away from other 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 we had hoped for.

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.

Team Successes
Our success working together stemmed from the fact that we knew and trusted each other. As a team, we hold social capital. In one project meeting, our funder commented, "I wasn't worried, I knew it would come together." This demonstrates that the trust held. The effective way we worked is also connected to the culture of our funder, 2010 Legacies Now. This funder has social trust. It believes that others are trustworthy and is, in turn, trusted by, and knowledgeable about both the literacy field and government.

The role of our funder must be acknowledged. Literacy Now Communities Program (Leona Gadsby), situated within 2010 Legacies Now, supports people in their communities to determine what processes make sense at the community level for literacy to increase. It also sets measurement and accountability requirements that make sense for learners and practitioners, while also being useful for government. The 2010 Legacies Now accountability approaches are quite innovative. The staff understands that it is their responsibility to demonstrate the impact of their funding program. Therefore, they take it upon themselves to collect data. In 2007, for example, they contracted a journalist to travel across the province, visiting communities and collecting stories about the changes the funding had supported.

Furthermore, the funds are removed from the government cycle and so there is more freedom to explore and investigate with in-depth projects that can work on a cycle that is natural to the community.

Project Summary

This project followed a learning cycle of planning, action, observation and reflection. Appendix 1 is a diagram showing our learning cycles within project timelines.

Research Data and Findings
We developed and tested a tool that allows us to talk about social capital development by naming and mapping literacy competencies learners achieve during the program's activities. 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. Finally, the tool contributes to the literacy field because it names and maps an area in literacy work that had not been included before in other measurement tools (BC Community Literacy Benchmarks, for example).

We found, however, that the tool is not yet sufficiently developed for more universal use. The next step should be the development of leveled 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".

Accomplishments
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.

As a literacy field (this includes our funder, Literacy Now), we talk, and have talked, about human capital, but we have not talked much about social capital because it is difficult to measure. By creating this tool, we are now able to talk about social capital. This is critically important to the definition of literacy and to expanding the conversation around accountability in adult literacy.

This tool takes into account the role of community development in literacy progress. It goes beyond an individual relationship between learner and practitioner. Literacy increases both human and social capital, which is vital for healthy and resilient communities. Social capital speaks to community leaders and so we are now better positioned to expand who is involved in the accountability conversation.

Learning
We follow a learning cycle of plan, act and reflect. This cycle has been implicit in the practice of Storytellers' staff. However, we have not been explicit in explaining this cycle and how our learning informs our action. This project helped us make this cycle explicit so that others can understand and share in our learning.

There have been many layers of learning in this project. On a conceptual level, we have learned how social capital is a key part of literacy development. This helped us articulate our own theory from action. We started the project knowing there was a gap in measurement. We learned what this gap is and also that there was a gap in the conversation. As we developed theory from our learning, we adjusted our work plans around the questions we were asking and how and when we used the tool. We also reviewed the literature and the field more than we had anticipated because, the more we learned, the more we understood how much there was to know.

Next Steps
The tool we developed is useful as a catalyst for further conversation and investigation around measurement. We now need indicators, data collection and reporting tools. We plan to continue to refine the tool and increase our understanding of social capital as part of literacy development. We have identified individuals and organizations that we want to bring into this conversation. We plan to create indicators for the tool and explore the possibility of adding this tool to the BC Community Literacy benchmarks. We will continue to use the tool locally in our own community with learners and practitioners, and within our community development literacy practice.

Appendix 1
Diagram of Project Learning Cycles
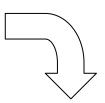
BC ART- Action Research Cycle

Reflect

Building our tool
-Recorded learning from tool development process and evolving drafts of the 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)
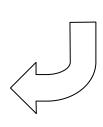-Refined our theory and edited our discussion paper (4 drafts over Sept-Oct 08)

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 backgrounder document for the project to share 'container' and theory developed (May-June 09)