

Literacy Research in Practice: SESSION REPORT

How do adults with little formal education learn?

A Collaborative Practitioner Research Project

Five practitioners from different small communities in British Columbia received funding from the provincial Ministry of Advanced Education to do a collaborative research study on how adults with little formal education learn.

In this session, each participant described how and why she became involved, how a long distance collaboration process was managed, how the research question was developed, and how the methodology evolved. The team struggled to define their terms and settled on looking at adults over 19 years old without a high school diploma or having completed a modified high school curriculum. The objectives of the project were:

- To explore how adults with little formal education learn
- To use a variety of research techniques, based on a community's needs, to investigate the question
- To involve literacy learners, practitioners and academic researchers in the research process
- To train literacy practitioners and learners in research skills
- To recommend different ways to support adult learners outside the formal system
- To design and document a structure for collaborative research across regions and disciplines.

The team documented the entire process by keeping and filing all e-mails, by taping meetings (and transcribing the first ones) and by recording minutes. They used a common questionnaire for interviews and focus groups, making some personal modifications (i.e., using journals, observing the learning of their own children).

The questions focus on what the interviewees do well and how they learned to do it, and on how they get the information they need daily. Only one researcher had completed her interviews at the time of the presentation; the others were to do them in the fall. Team members discussed the challenges they have faced and the personal growth they've experienced. Challenges included learning to think of oneself as a researcher, being skeptical about qualitative methodology, knowing when to push team members, working through academic structures such as Ethics Committees, which were not designed for literacy projects, finding time for reflection, questioning the power relations when university-based researchers work with non-university researchers, and more.

A rich discussion emerged. One presenter posed the question: Is our personal and professional gratification justification enough for doing and being funded to do research? Will it have a social impact or is it self-indulgent? From a succinct "no" and "hopefully"

as answers, the responses broadened. One participant said that research is an educational process in itself and cannot be just personal and professional gratification. Another pointed out that pragmatic skills, such as collaboration and management, are learned that contribute to educational governance. This type of research is a form of professional development. [LS]