

# **Practicing Shared Accountability**

## **Final Report**

### **Newfoundland Action Research Team**

#### **Acknowledgements**

The report was developed as part of the national action research project: *Connecting the Dots: Improving Accountability in the Adult Literacy Field in Canada*.

Funding for the project was provided by the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES) Human Resources and Skills Development Canada.

## Introduction

### Research Question

The project explored accountability in communications and policy in the literacy field. Participants in the Newfoundland and Labrador Connecting the Dots project discussed accountability in relation to their work and their ability to collaborate across government and community sectors. The project involved a consultation process to “improve the accountability system and outcomes for the province’s adult literacy learners”. The community consultation process for the province’s Strategic Adult Literacy Plan was part of the background to this action research.

The two research participants – Literacy Newfoundland and Labrador and the Adult Learning and Literacy Division of the Department of Education – do not have a core funding relationship. While a funding relationship might exist at times, it is secondary to a relationship of shared accountability to the community that both serve. The Department has politically mandated authority to determine policies for literacy and adult basic education, while Literacy Newfoundland and Labrador is a community-based umbrella organization that represents a network of learners, practitioners and other stakeholders with vested interests in the development of those policies.

### Project Goals

The goals of the project were to:

- Identify and work towards a common understanding of the purpose and impact of accountability in the adult literacy field
- Support meaningful dialogue and stakeholder consultation around literacy initiatives, including the Division’s current work on a new strategic plan for adult literacy

These goals coincide with the second and third goals of *Connecting the Dots*:

- Find a common language between the community and government/funders to talk about accountability
- Build on this knowledge and use the language to develop innovative models that can satisfy the needs and requirements of both providers and funders and improve accountability in positive ways

## Team Members and Roles

The Action Research Team had a mix of researchers and participants, including: members of Literacy Newfoundland and Labrador (including the Executive Director and two co-chairs ); members of the Adult Learning and Literacy Division of the Department of Education, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador (the Director, a manager and a consultant); one researcher; and two research friends hired for this project.

The roles and responsibilities of the Team members were:

*Literacy Newfoundland and Labrador and the Adult Learning and Literacy Division of the Department of Education, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador*

- Participants representing the partner organizations signed letters giving ethical consent to the project.
- The Executive Director of Literacy Newfoundland and Labrador participated in the action research and served as manager for the project.
- The ongoing dialogue between representatives of the two partner organizations created the body of data that was later analyzed by the research team.

### *Research Team*

- The research friend facilitated the meetings to help keep discussions focused. The concept of a research 'friend' is significant to participatory action research. In traditional social research, the researcher maintains a distance from the object of study. In action research, the distinction between participants and researchers is broken down — all participants share responsibility for the research. To see the facilitator as a friend is meant to further reduce barriers between researchers and participants.
- The researcher took field notes and recorded the sessions to ensure clarity and accuracy.
- The research advisor helped with discussions and data analysis.
- The research team collaborated in compiling and interpreting the data.

The first task was to create and administer a consent letter on ethical issues by the research participants. (See Appendix 1) Adhering to meeting times presented a challenge as participants typically had busy, unpredictable schedules. Meeting attendance varied; the facilitator and researcher attended all meetings, and the research advisor attended most. At a minimum, the meetings were also attended by at least one, and most often by two or more representatives from both the Division and community partner organizations.

## Communication Tool

Initially, participants agreed to create a handbook for communications between Literacy Newfoundland and Labrador and the Division of Adult Learning and Literacy that would capture:

- Values for strong communication
- Promising practices
- Considerations for future consultations
- A brief overview of the challenges facing horizontal collaboration between government and community

During the course of the project, it became clear that a handbook might not be the most appropriate tool. It was decided that a more visual, tangible tool would be more suitable. The poster that was eventually developed draws directly from action research team dialogue and was a focus of phase two discussions. It aims to fulfill the second goal of Connecting the Dots to establishing a common language between community and government to improve accountability for both sides.

## **Project Summary**

Action research provides a means to embrace differing viewpoints in that it emphasizes the process of research over a final, fully realized end product. A lack of consensus points to an opportunity for further exploration.

This project changed during the course of the team meetings, email exchanges and discussions. Divergent views on the aims and outcomes emerged at various times. As it became clear that it would not be possible to focus strictly on the Strategic Adult Literacy Plan, for reasons beyond our control, the team looked at other significant issues, such as professional development. Likewise, while the group originally focused on creating a handbook, there was an eventual shift to the idea of a visual communication tool.

As the project evolved, the team was able to practice stronger communications and shared accountability. Ultimately, the issue and tool under discussion came to be of less importance than the gains in effective communication and mutual understanding between project participants.

### **Phase One: Data, Findings and Accomplishments**

#### *Early Discussions of Accountability Issues*

At the first meeting, the following dimensions of accountability were identified as the basis for the fall meetings:

- Who am I accountable to? For what and to what end?
- How do multiple accountabilities coexist? Are they in competition? How?
- What limits my ability to be accountable?

- How does the need for accountability limit my work?
- Does the responsibility to be accountable prevent me from achieving things?
- Are my accountabilities opaque to other stakeholders? Can they be demystified?

From October to December 2008, the action research group met six times to explore facets of accountability, including:

- communication practices
- accountability relationships between individuals and organizations
- barriers and supports to achieving accountability
- strategies for phase two activities of this project.

### *The Importance of Communication and Trust*

In this phase, participants identified principles of good communication and a range of factors affecting accountability. Learning was continuous in the first phase, as it became evident how barriers to communication affect accountability. A strong focus on communication emerged in Meeting 4, when participants were asked what they imagined would be the outcome/s of the project. Answers included:

- enabling an open dialogue in both directions
- finding ways to mutually acknowledge sincere efforts
- making conversation between community and government easier
- improving trust
- finding ways to identify points of collaboration and competition
- collaborating to identify issues in the field
- achieving a better understanding of where organizations fit and of what is behind decisions affecting the literacy field

All these answers suggest that improving accountability calls for improving communication.

Although there is a shared mandate in NL to serve the literacy community, at times representatives of government and community might appear to be at cross-purposes. This is complicated by the way we negotiate between different modes of knowing, i.e. do we simply know about one another (*propositional knowledge* based on titles and duties) or do we know one another directly (*experiential knowledge* based on names and experiences)? The ability to establish and maintain trust probably speaks more to the experiential mode of knowing, yet we have commitments by virtue of our titles and duties. Perhaps a fruitful dialogue is one that can successfully negotiate between these two ways of knowing.

## *Communications Tool*

In the first phase, the research participants agreed that one project outcome should be a communication tool to facilitate communications and consultation between partners coming from different perspectives. In the longer term, it could be used by a broad spectrum of participants and, at the same time, support continued communication and consultation between future leaders of Literacy Newfoundland and Labrador (or its successors) and those in government responsible for adult literacy.

### **Phase Two: Data, Findings and Accomplishments**

Phase One activities introduced participants to valuable consultation approaches to consider in Phase Two. As the number of stakeholders grew, so did the number of accountabilities.

Phase Two took place between January and June 2009. The objectives at this time included to identify one current field practice for action, e.g., an accountability practice around which they could initiate a change/improvement (Literacy Newfoundland and Labrador, report, December 2008).

Six meetings were held in this phase. The research friend met separately in January with each of the lead participants from Literacy Newfoundland and Labrador and the Division to discuss the choice of the field practice and the focus for meetings.

#### *Focus on Professional Development*

Following several discussions, it was agreed that the focus would be professional development for practitioners. Over four meetings, the team discussed the necessary components for a consultation on this issue to achieve the desired outcomes established in Phase One. Each meeting addressed one of the following consultation components:

- Qualifications of practitioners – What is expected of practitioners (by whom and in what circumstances) and what opportunities exist for improving upon qualifications?
- Timelines – What processes would be necessary to undertake consultations on professional development and what factors affect the timelines for those processes?
- Consultation and feedback – How is consultation carried out and how is feedback collected and used within the different organizations?
- Evaluation – How are the outcomes of activities and products of programming assessed and how do those assessments affect future planning?

The question of the content and purpose of the communication tool came up regularly in the second phase meetings. It was hoped that the tool would draw from the researchers' analyses of data from these meetings.

It was agreed that the tool would support consultations between those in a leadership position in the Division of Adult Learning and Literacy and Literacy Newfoundland and Labrador. In other words, it was conceived as giving advice to future leaders based on the experience of the present leaders. This objective approach is meant to prevent the communication process

from being overly reliant on the personalities of those involved and to transfer knowledge over time.

Highlights from the Phase Two discussions are outlined below.

On the *qualifications of practitioners*:

- the question of parity in pay between practitioners
- the need for resources, spaces and qualified practitioners
- the need to offer workshops when curriculum changes
- the use of professional development for practitioners across the field
- the need to build a case for greater, improved, and more targeted services
- the question of standardization in qualifications across the field

On *timelines*:

- the need for the best possible information from the community in order to qualify decisions on professional development
- the need to allow for the unexpected within a planned timeline
- possible community disparities in terms of who has the time to take on the research to build a business case for the province on professional development
- the need for reporting structures to complement programming, for example: allowing community groups to renew proposals for existing programs, rather than requiring them to re-propose projects year after year

On *consultation and feedback*:

- the need to target groups with active Adult Basic Education (ABE) contracts and those who have had federal or provincial work completed in the past, but might not currently be active because of funding or other constraints
- the fact that the province does not act as an employer for community-based adult literacy organizations
- the role technology can play in consultation, cutting down on cost, travel time, etc...
- that feedback can take many forms – an artwork can capture a process and be a living, accessible document that can be updated over time
- that feedback cannot always be acted upon directly, but can still inform
- the ethical requirement involved in feedback, i.e. even when one can't act, one still has a responsibility to do something and can't ignore feedback

On *evaluation*:

- the need to know whether a professional development session met anyone's needs, helped or made a difference, or had gaps or strengths
- research showing that peer-supported learning for practitioners is the most successful approach and that it must be well prepared up front
- the question of who has a say in professional development and who we would be looking to speak to in doing a consultation
- whether there is value in evaluating expectations or taking a pre/post approach

## **Themes from the Connecting the Dots Action Research Study**

**These themes are the crux of the study. How can we highlight them instead of burying them in the middle?**

This section explains from the methodology we used in the study.

The data from the discussions were first analyzed by the researcher to create field notes and summaries of key points. Using project guidelines and the research questions, all data from meetings between the Division and the Literacy NL team were reviewed. These data consisted of meeting minutes, emails among all project members, project documents and minutes of the meetings of the research team

One research advisor assigned codes to all the research data: The data were read and broken down into units of meaning. These units were then grouped to form codes of like meaning. These codes are defined as clusters and can indicate meaningful issues within the discussion.

A constant comparative methodology approach enabled the researcher to extrapolate the codes and themes using the criteria for the code from the research guidelines. In July, the lead members of each group of participants reviewed the draft findings to validate and make corrections.

### **Accountability Codes**

- The Nature of Accountability — Accountability is complex, involving personal and professional contexts. It can be limiting because of all these complex constraints, especially the fear of its consequences.
- Accountability to Whom and for What? — Accountability comes from both the funder and from those ultimately receiving funds for literacy. The Department of Education's Adult Learning and Literacy Division mentions accountability to self and to those surrounding the Division in government (at the same level, above and below).
- Intrinsic Accountability Problem with "Literacy" — Being specific about the implications of improving accountability in literacy work is difficult.



## Communication Codes

- Constraints to Communication (Perceptions by and about the Adult Learning and Literacy Division) — Division participants believe that, because they work within government, some members of the literacy community might feel they are out of touch with the community. Literacy Newfoundland and Labrador notes their own awareness of the natural constraints that might exist within a government structure (framework, culture).
- Constraints to Communication (Literacy Newfoundland and Labrador perspective) — Given that optimal communication and consultation are goals for Literacy NL and government and given that all resources are finite, Literacy NL expressed concerns that there might not be enough to ensure that community voices would be heard.
- Trust as a Precursor of Effective Communication — Division participants saw trust as a critical component of successful communications, but were concerned that it was difficult to get beyond the position-to-position relationship and reach a person-to-person communication.
- Differences between the Two Sides as 'Culture' — Participants characterized the constraints binding the two sides as the result of their having different cultures.
- History of Communication between Literacy NL and the Adult Learning and Literacy Division — Both parties recognize that there have been past challenges to communication. With this acknowledgement comes the recognition that outcomes from this project should result in improved communication practices.
- Improving Communication Strategies: Stakeholder Input — Specific suggestions for improving communications included: confronting historical tensions, bringing people from both sides together in a room, getting timely responses to communications from one side to the other and appreciating the variety of viewpoints on each side.
- Improving Communications: Communication Tool for Literacy NL and the Division — Various viewpoints were expressed about what the communication tool could do and for whom.

## Content Codes

- Improving Professional Development for Practitioners — There was a range of discussion on professional development for practitioners and implications in the field.
- Professional Development for Literacy Practitioners as a Point of Negotiation — Both sides raised aspects of professional development and how these would fit within a hypothetical negotiation between Literacy NL and the government.
- Dealing with the Strategic Adult Literacy Plan (SALP) for NL — A discussion on the SALP process and its relevance to the discussion on accountability stimulated discussion on a variety of considerations.

## **Challenges**

### **Context**

The Action Research Team faced a number of challenges. The new Strategic Adult Literacy Plan consultations were part of the original context from which the project was developed. However, this context was not developed as the focus of action for reasons outside the scope of the project. The Team then sought an alternative focus. After much discussion, it was agreed that professional development could form the basis of a dialogue about what should be included in a consultation process. Professional development thus became the data source for developing the communication tool.

### **Action Research**

Participants faced constraints in terms of the extent to which they could translate investigation into practice. These included directives given by a Board, the requirement that a Division's work align with the departmental mandate, or limitations on the jurisdiction of one side or the other in setting policy. One of the challenges was to determine what could feasibly be accomplished by way of action research despite these constraints.

We also found that each action results in multiple new areas for potential action, so that the scope of an action research initiative is open ended and difficult to limit.

### **Timeline**

One key learning was that eight months was a short period of time in which to conduct such a complicated initiative, especially when certain goals are undefined at the outset. It should also be said that inspiration does not come easily as a short timeline advances.

The brief timeline of the second phase of our action was further reduced by a late identification of the action to be undertaken in this phase. Thus, we did not complete a consultation with extended stakeholders. An extension to the project in April allowed us to develop a survey on professional development. The survey, scheduled for use in the fall of 2009, fulfills the project's second goal of a meaningful stakeholder consultation.

## **What the Project Achieved**

This project strengthened communication and mutual understanding of participants' challenges and views, leading the team to develop a tool for communication between not-for-profit and government sectors. The meetings created a valuable forum for discussion of a wide range of topics and issues in literacy. This is reflected in the extent to which participants used the meetings to seek out collaborations that went beyond the immediate needs of the Connecting the Dots project.

At the same time, the overall learning, as well as its value likely varies from one team member to another. The conversation themes, especially those around communication, provide continuing areas for contemplation. These are further explored in the communication tool.

In closing this report, we circle back to our initial goals for the project. Were we able to effectively deliver on any of the following?

- To identify and work towards a common understanding of the purpose and impact of accountability in the adult literacy field

Accountability in the field is multi-layered and its definition varies, depending upon whose accountability is under consideration. Both the Division and the team were able to define their own accountabilities – professional and personal – as well as reflect on the accountabilities of other stakeholders,

From the outset, each partner identified improvements to services for the adult learner as a shared primary concern. This gave a common accountability focus to developing discussions.

- To support meaningful dialogue and stakeholder consultation around literacy initiatives, including the Division's current work on a new strategic plan for adult literacy.

While it was not possible to include the Division's current work on a new strategic plan for adult literacy as a topic for consultation within the framework of the project, discussion on this topic continued outside the project. This change was necessary and accepted by all participants as resulting from the accountability structures of the Division.

Participants were able to engage in a meaningful dialogue on several issues, and at several levels:

1. The initial review of professional development was completed at the end of Phase Two. The survey on professional development, as a continuing action coming out of this initiative, will enable meaningful consultation with the province's stakeholders.

2. Information on ongoing initiatives undertaken by both the Division and Literacy NL were continuously updated as the project moved forward.

3. Opportunities to air the concerns of each partner on a range of issues were explored as a natural by-product of the project's meetings.

- To devise a model of communication to allow for continuous dialogue and innovation to improve accountability in the literacy field

Early in Phase Two, the partners realized that they had opened up a new dimension to their relationship and that more meaningful communication should be supported. They initiated a series of meetings outside the project, beginning a continuous dialogue around areas of common concern. They also undertook to review other modes of communication between their respective offices to identify which ones – oral, face to face, written - would best meet their respective accountability needs in a given situation.

There were *timely reminders*:

1. That the Division remains keen to be kept informed of all activities happening in the Literacy NL office

2. That there is a hierarchy of communication structures within government and that real outcomes are improved through understanding these structures
3. That community has an innate need to retrace historical contexts
4. That there are times when only oral discourse, or only written text, is the right mode for communication

There were also challenges, or *opportunities for new learning*:

1. Missed communications that led to miss-steps
2. Mixed participation due to competing responsibilities
3. Incorrect assumptions as to what was being asked or stated;
4. Interruptions and delays to finishing the task at hand.

## **Next Steps**

Literacy Newfoundland and Labrador and the Division of Adult Learning and Literacy will work together with the research team to conduct a survey for literacy and adult basic education practitioners and stakeholders on the issue of professional development. This will continue the action process initiated in Phase Two. This survey will provide a forum to review professional development practices in which all players – community and government – will be at the table. Should a professional development initiative emerge from the results of this survey, it will provide an opportunity to share the action research project outcomes.

The research team also hopes that the communication tool will be general enough to be of some use to other non-governmental organizations and government departments dealing with such organizations – both within and outside the field of literacy.

## Appendix 1

Letter of consent on ethical issues

Literacy Newfoundland and Labrador  
Regatta Plaza 2, 84 Elizabeth Ave, Suite 210  
P.O. Box 8174, Stn.A  
St. John's, NL A1B 3M9

June 11, 2008

To:

Possible Participants in a Connecting the Dots Project, Newfoundland and Labrador.

This letter is to ask for your participation in the Literacy Newfoundland and Labrador 2008/9 project on accountability and adult literacy (Connecting the Dots) funded by the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills, Human Resources and Social Development Canada, and managed by The Centre for Literacy of Quebec. The Newfoundland and Labrador project is one of five current, community-based projects under Connecting the Dots.

In this project, the provincial literacy coalition, Literacy Newfoundland and Labrador, will work with the Department of Education, Division of Adult Learning and Literacy. They will design and conduct a collaborative process of stakeholder communication and involvement to contribute to the development of accountability policy and practices. The timing of this joint venture aligns with the Division's launch of a community consultation process to inform a new strategic plan for the adult literacy sector. The project will afford the two partners the opportunity to examine and address critical issues in accountability such as who is accountable for what, to whom, and to what purpose. A possible secondary outcome for this work will address a critical component of the accountability equation: How do we create on-going communication and trust?

You are being asked to participate in this project because you hold a key position in the structure of administration of adult literacy provisions in Newfoundland and Labrador. It is expected that your participation will benefit you and your interests in helping to shape and promote accountability in literacy policy development and practices. However, your involvement may also bring you into some conflicts in your employment situation. The group will do its utmost to resolve such conflicts to the satisfaction of all.

Your role in this project will be to take part in discussions involving the Division of Adult Learning and Literacy as well as Literacy Newfoundland and Labrador key personnel. These discussions will take place in meetings held probably once or twice a month for about two to three hours each time. The project is planned to continue from July 2008 to May 2009. You

will also be expected to read and contribute to e-mail and hard-copy correspondence relating to the objectives of the project. Data will be collected from these meetings in the form of notes taken by a researcher associated with this project. Some meetings will be tape-recorded to assist the researcher in making accurate notes. Record will be kept of the written correspondence and documents related to these discussions. All raw data will be kept in a secure place in the offices of Literacy Newfoundland and Labrador to prevent possibilities of misuse. The raw data will be destroyed two years after the completion of the project. You will also be expected to take part in reviewing the data and finding significant themes which come out of the discussions. These themes, as refined into interim and final reports, will be the main results of this project. You may be quoted directly in such published materials from the project, but you will have an opportunity to see any of your quotes and revise or remove them before publication if you see fit. Articles based on this study may be published in local or national reports or publications.

You have a right to access to any data collected on your participation, and you can ask to have portions of those data relating to you corrected or deleted from the project. You may withdraw from the project at any time without being required to give reasons for this action. At that time, you can ask to have any data you have contributed removed from the study.

If you agree to these conditions, please sign below. A copy of this letter, signed by you and the manager of this research project will be given to you for your records.

I agree to participate in this project under the conditions described above.

\_\_\_\_\_ Date,  
Participant's signature

\_\_\_\_\_ Date,  
Signature of Researcher