

## **Action Research Project Summary**

### ***Connecting the Dots: Practicing Shared Accountability*** **Literacy Newfoundland and Labrador** **St. John's, NL**

#### **Research Question**

*How can partners, Literacy NL and NL Department of Education, Adult Learning and Literacy Division, improve communication to allow for continuous dialogue and innovation in addressing accountability needs in the literacy field?*

#### **Objectives**

- 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 Department of Education/Adult Learning and Literacy Division's current work on a new strategic plan for adult literacy.

#### **Team Members**

Project Manager	<i>Caroline Vaughan</i> , Executive Director, Literacy Newfoundland & Labrador Participated in all meetings; provided direction to and managed the action research project
Funder	<i>Candice Ennis-Williams</i> , Department of Education, Division of Adult Learning and Literacy Participated in discussions at all meetings; liaised with government
Research Advisor	<i>Barbara Burnaby</i> Participated in discussions; assisted in facilitating meetings and with data analysis
Research Friend	<i>Joan Whelan</i> Facilitated meetings by helping to ensure that discussions maintained focus
Researcher	<i>Dan Ferguson</i> Kept notes and recorded all meetings The three researchers comprised the research team — collaborating in compiling and interpreting the data.

## Methods

The project was divided into two phases, outlined below:

### *Phase One*

From October to December 2008, the action research group met six times to explore aspects of accountability, including communication practices, accountability relationships between individuals and organizations, barriers and supports to achieving accountability, and identifying the approach to phase two of the project.

The six meetings explored various questions, such as:

- 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?

### *Phase Two*

From January to June 2009, in the second phase, the partners identified one current field practice for action. Six meetings were held with *professional development for practitioners* as the focus for action. The team used this focus to apply the guidelines and practices identified in Phase One to an actual consultation around an accountability-related issue. Meetings revolved around the following topics:

- Qualifications of practitioners – what is expected of practitioners, by whom and in what circumstances; what opportunities exist for improving upon qualifications?

Discussed: 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; and standardization in qualifications across the field

- Timelines – what processes would be necessary to undertake consultations on professional development and what factors affect the timelines for those processes?

Discussed: 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; and the need for reporting structures to complement programming

- Consultation and feedback – how is consultation carried out and how is feedback collected and used within the different organizations?

Discussed: 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; that feedback can take many forms and 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

- Evaluation – how are the outcomes of activities and products of programming assessed and how do those assessments affect future planning?

Discussed: the need to know whether a professional development session met anyone's needs, made a difference or had gaps/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

## Challenges

- Context: 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 the issue of 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: In this project, participants faced constraints in terms of the extent to which they could translate investigation into practice. There were a number of constraints, including 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 of this project was therefore to determine what could feasibly be accomplished by way of action research in spite of 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.

## Findings

In Phase One, participants identified principles of good communication and a range of factors affecting accountability:

- Discussions highlighted that improving accountability to one another calls for improving communication.
- Discussions also revealed that, although there is a shared mandate to serve the literacy community, at times representatives of government and community might appear 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). In the former case, we must deal with accountabilities, while in the latter, we have obligations to each other. 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."

Some of the group dynamics have been captured in the mid-term report for the Newfoundland and Labrador project, in which the communicative values expressed in Phase One of the project are well-documented.

(See: [www.literacyandaccountability.ca/innovate-nlprogress](http://www.literacyandaccountability.ca/innovate-nlprogress))

The Phase One values, combined with the poster's practical lessons for practicing shared accountability, constitute the major learning for Phase Two of this project.

### **Voices from the Research**

The following are some highlights of the participant voices recorded in phase two:

*Trust is a big issue between the organization and the division. [The literacy coalition and government] have openly talked about how to get beyond that and be able to talk it through and feel the level of comfort needed to say we are true partners.*

*You have accountabilities that constrict you, and when I talk about government, I don't talk about you, I really do talk about the constriction.*

*Lots of times I walk into a room and the wall is already constructed; there is a level of expectation that I'm going to disappoint people before I open my mouth, or that I'm going to give government speak and not be authentic in dialogue...*

*But how do we ensure that cynicism and history is acknowledged and that we can still move forward?*

### **Outputs**

- A poster of tips for practicing shared accountability (copies provided to symposium participants).
- Research brief on horizontal governance.
- A draft professional development survey for distribution to practitioners.

### **Outcomes**

- The project identified “lessons learned” in practicing shared accountability, specifically for literacy initiatives focusing on accountability, consultation and professional development.
- 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 – both professional and personal – as well as reflect on the accountabilities of other stakeholders,
- 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.