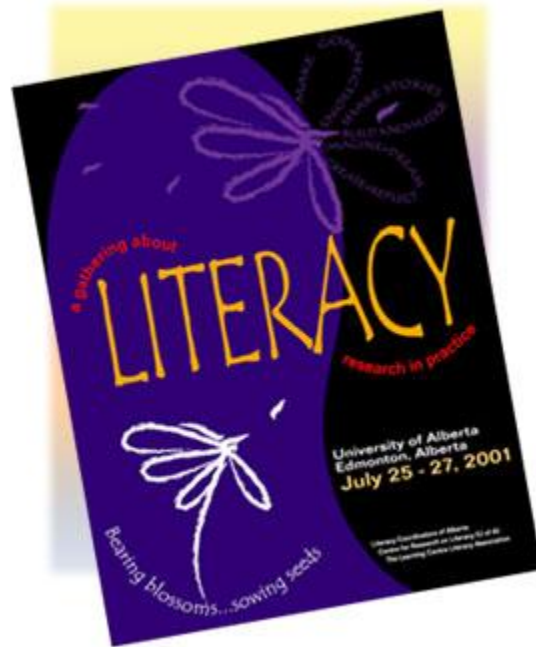


## Literacy Research in Practice

### Research in Practice

A Gathering about Literacy Research in Practice was held at the University of Alberta in Edmonton from July 25 - 27, 2001. Chaired by Mary Norton of the Edmonton Learning Centre, the gathering brought together more than 100 Canadian practitioners who have participated in or are considering doing practice-based research in literacy. Mary Hamilton and Jane Mace, British researchers with many years of experience in the field, acted as respondents and scholars-in-residence for the three days. Besides the formal presentations, there were many opportunities for participants to share and discuss the issues that bind and divide them. A full conference report, edited by Helen Woodrow, will be available in early winter 2002.



**Communities of Research: A Study of Literacy Action Research Networks in the U.S., U.K., Australia, (and Canada),**  
by Allan Quigley & Mary Norton

[Researchers Allan Quigley and Mary Norton, with funding from the National Literacy Secretariat, surveyed eleven research networks that are or have been involved in some form of participatory research in literacy in the U.S., U.K. and Australia. They presented the findings, summarized below, at the Edmonton Gathering.]

#### **Who is involved**

Participants included literacy teachers, tutors, administrators and researchers in two general categories: Those with a professional development focus (i.e., most in the U.S., except PALPIN) and those interested in fostering a literacy research culture (i.e., those in the U.K. and some in Australia). [[See Networks below](#)]

#### **Why practitioners are involved in research**

They cited linking research to practice; professional development; improving personal practice, and creating new knowledge. The desire to have a “voice” was explicitly and implicitly named as well.

#### **What topics are being researched?**

The networks fall into two groups. Some networks have open agendas and focus on dozens of issues, from retention to ESL teaching methods, to fund raising methods. Others

have national, state-wide or regional foci. Examples:

- ALNARC: Special Needs issues around literacy and numeracy is a current topic.
- AMI: In New England, the single topic is Adult Multiple Intelligences.
- Kentucky: The main focus is student retention.

## **Research methods**

Action Research, Participatory Inquiry, and Collaborative Research (sometimes defined as “systematic intentional inquiry”) were cited.

## **How the networks are structured and funded**

Most are linked to, or have support, from universities, literacy institutes, and/or professional development centres. Except RaPAL, all have received government funding or grants. Some also obtain funding from foundations. In the U.S., all government funding must be awarded through bidding. ALNARC has been funded by government but may go to bidding. All except RaPAL have staff who receive direct or indirect payment. RaPAL is entirely volunteer.

## **How they support practitioner-researchers**

The networks provide support through training and stipends. Training takes the form of institutes or workshops for one or more days; regular group and/or network meetings face-to-face and/or by internet; research mentors and buddies within and across groups; and resources such as research handbooks and Websites for reference. Stipends/ honoraria range from \$1,200 to \$5,000 (Australian) within ALNARC to \$100, \$300, and \$500 (US) for completed projects.

## **How they disseminate findings**

Findings are disseminated through published monograph series, newsletters, websites and Internet connections, and conferences (i.e., special conferences for Networks and as parts of general conferences)

## **Major Challenges**

Respondents named lack of time, issues of identity and self-concept, isolation, writing up the research, and involving learners in the follow-up process of dissemination, write-ups, and conference participation.

## **Benefits Perceived**

Respondents spoke of a transformative process, of heightened critical reflection ability, of creating a culture where one can pose the “unacceptable,” of new personal and program selfimage, of heightened professional development skills and process, and of new

knowledge for everyday practice.

## Networks surveyed (in alphabetical order)

**The Adult Multiple Intelligences (AMI) Study** was one of ten studies undertaken by the National Center for the Study of Adult Language and Literacy (NCSALL) and coordinated through World Education and the New England Literacy Resource Centre. It involved teachers in participatory and collaborative planning and implementing projects related to AMI theory.

**ALNARC (Adult Literacy and Numeracy Research Consortium)** is a national Australian collaboration for research into adult literacy and numeracy. The network operates through university – based centers in each state, with national coordination.

[www.staff.vu.edu.au/alnarc](http://www.staff.vu.edu.au/alnarc)

### Examples of practices

#### Linking Research to Practice-Creating New Knowledge

- ALNARC links researchers and practitioners by putting research mentors with new practitioner-researchers.
- RaPAL asks researchers and practitioner-researchers to critically think about and examine both practice and issues.
- PALPIN emphasizes problemposing and stresses critical examination of practice over problem-solving.
- Bridges to Practice focuses on new topics concerning adults with learning disabilities in literacy.

#### Professional Development- Improving Personal Practice Through Reflection:

- PAARN, The Virginia Adult- Ed/Research Network, GALPIN, Project IDEA, and the Kentucky Practitioner Inquiry Project emphasize identifying and addressing practice problems. Impact studies in Pennsylvania indicate higher levels of leadership, reflection, critical thinking among participants.

#### Gaining Voice

- In Australia, ALNARC operates with government funding and has a stated aim of informing policy at the state and federal level.
- RaPAL, which operates with limited government funding, has a stated aim of critiquing policies and practices.
- In the U.S., most networks have developed Websites for wider distribution of findings but none have a stated aim of informing or critiquing policy

**Bridges to Practice in California** used On-line Action Research (OAR) to support research and communication about topics not previously researched for adults with learning disabilities.

**GALPIN (Georgia Adult Literacy Inquiry Network)** was initiated in 1995 as part of a three-year project. The project aimed to contribute to the professional growth of teachers by promoting and strengthening inquiry based staff development opportunities and to better meet learner needs.

**Kentucky Practitioner Inquiry Projects** involve action research teams to address issues of student retention.

<http://www.state.ky.us/agencies/wforce/daelnewsletter/page6.html>

**The Learning From Practice Project (PA)** was initiated in 1995 to provide professional development for practitioners interested in improving teaching, learning, and programs. The project includes the Pennsylvania Action Research Network (PAARN) and the Pennsylvania Adult Literacy Practitioner Inquiry Network (PALPIN).

<http://www.learningfrompractice.org/default.htm>

**NCELTR (The National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research)** Action Research Projects are a means to involve teachers in research on their practice. The projects are coordinated and supported through the Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP) Research Centre in Sydney, Australia.

<http://www.nceltr.mq.edu.au/amep/index.htm>

**Project IDEA** was initiated in Texas in 1996 to provide an alternative form of staff professional development.

<http://www-tcall.tamu.edu/>

<http://project-idea.com/>

**RaPAL (Research and Practice in Adult Literacy Network)** is an independent voluntary organization based in Britain, founded in 1988. <http://www.literacy.lancs.ac.uk/rapal/RaPAL.htm>

**The Virginia Adult Education Research Network** was initiated in 1991 to encourage practitioner research among adult educators in Virginia.

Source: Presentation by Allan Quigley and Mary Norton.