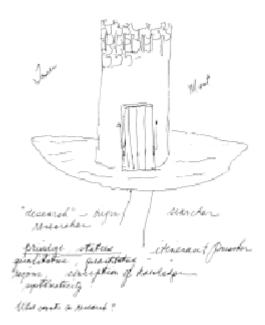
Literacy Research in Practice: CONFERENCE REPORT

Reflections on The Gathering

Jane Mace crystallized her experience of being at the Gathering. "I've met people this week who swim in the lightning," she said of the group. Allan Quigley said that after fifteen years as a practitioner and fifteen as a professor, he believes there is a research revolution going on. He traced the development from the 1930s, when research meant only scientific inquiry to today when qualitative method is accepted and becoming more widespread. Quoting Zora Neale Hurston, he said, "Research is just formalized curiosity."

A tone was set in the opening session. Sitting in a circular Kiva of tiered wooden benches arranged around an open space (in aboriginal culture a gathering place of equality and respect), we listened to Priscilla George, the Rainbow



Woman (Ningwakwe) who has inspired the flourishing movement of the past decade in Canadian aboriginal literacy, share her story about overcoming her fear of singing in public as an example of transcendence of fear and working through doubt. These themes recurred through many of the stories told by presenters about their struggle to see themselves as researchers.

In small groups, in workshops, in round tables and in social networks, we asked what it means to do research, when does a teacher call herself a researcher, and why. One participant said, "Research changes us. It forces us to examine who we are and ask why we do this and what we believe in... There is some risk for the researcher; she can be so careful of everyone else's vision that that she loses her own...And there is always the sense of being an outsider that creates tension..."

Being outside the mainstream seemed to be one consequence of doing participatory research. This was not necessarily seen as a negative. Mainstream, suggested one woman, may be a vision that's become stagnant; creating new knowledge means being counter culture.

One presenter used the metaphor of a gap. While we always say, "Mind the gap" perceiving it as a space into which we could fall and get hurt, she suggested that practitioner—researchers are living in the gap, choosing to work where there is some space and freedom.

In feedback from the first day, Mary Hamilton reported hearing discussions of ethics, of consent, and of naming. She highlighted issues of power in the dynamics of research as academics, practitioners and learners work within and against institutional shaping and constraints. She noted the gendered nature of research processes and the challenge of identifying ourselves as researchers.

Replays from the Gathering

In the session called How do Adults with Little Formal Education Learn?" [see p. 12], respondent Jane Mace asked," What comes after the word "learn?" If we say "learn to knit," "learn to care," "learn to care for a diabetic child," or "learn to be," are we talking about the same kind of learning?

"Life as a practitioner got in the way. Institutional bureaucracy got in the way..."

"It's hard to think of myself as a researcher. I'm still a beginner in terms of rigour."

"Research is an educational process in itself, a fascinating exploration."

"Pragmatic skills are learned—collaboration, management— that contribute to educational governance and professional development."

"You don't need funding to think."

But, what counts as research? "The working context of literacy," she said, "forces practitioners to [re]invent the model(s) of research, creating something not quite

recognizable in either place." Mary spoke about the challenge of building a research culture, of what supports are needed. "We have a field full of knowledge and wisdom with no one to drive it."

Margaret Herrington, chair of RaPAL (UK), noted that while the UK is less involved with volunteer issues, it is dealing with the professionalization of the field which she supports. Research-in-practice is a form of professional development. She described how discussion inquiry can open up differences in practice. However, she cautioned, "Calling it research-inpractice doesn't resolve the difficulty of practitioners seeing themselves as researchers. I see it as an organic process. The nature of the work is investigatory—trying to resolve difficulties daily. My practice is research-in-practice."

An early reflection — as always, at lettracy gathering manly worker. World men lange to field a son of field on the stands of the Starring of separation destination. Virginia Mangarether - Mangarether - Mangarether - Mangarether - Mangarether - Mangarethering theman - Mangarethering the land of the Standard of Standard - Court land. Michaeland Grand father.

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Working against the optimism of new researchers are the realities described in one poorlyattended session where Beth Young shared findings from years of research on part-time workers and changing work conditions-- flexible workplace and workforce. Her study of literacy workers in Alberta reflected the general North American pattern of part-time workers, mainly women, with low or no benefits, no pensions and often multiple jobs. In conditions such as these, how many teacher-researchers can realistically be expected?

There is no doubt that the research-practitioners at The Gathering spoke powerfully to the possibilities of incorporating inquiry into teaching. Still, at times there was a missionary tone to the event; as one participant noted ironically, Participatory can also be oppressive."

In a conference that was talking about different ways of knowing and different models of

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inquiring, there was an undercurrent of anti-academic feeling that silenced the few traditional researchers present. Is every act of reflection or inquiry a piece of research? Is every instance of sharing practice a research event? Every teacher should be a reflective practitioner, but does every teacher have to be a researcher?

Can we work more effectively to bridge the gap between the academic and practicebased researchers?

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Many of the tensions that were named at The Gathering call for continuing exploration. [LS]

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