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Naming Our World, Claiming Our Knowledge: Research-in-Practice in Adult Literacy Programs

Throughout its history adult literacy education has been defined, described, researched, and effectively controlled by external entities. This article discusses how literacy practitioners and learners are gaining a voice through the production of their own knowledge using research-in-practice. It especially examines the applicability, benefits, and inherent risks of practitioner action research, provides a discussion of how this research paradigm is defined, and concludes with possibilities for the future.

Depuis ses débuts, l'alphabétisation des adultes a toujours été définie, décrite, étudiée et contrôlée par des entités externes. L'auteur discute de la façon dont les enseignants et les apprenants en alphabétisation commencent à se faire entendre en créant leurs propres connaissances à partir de recherches-actions. Plus précisément, il étudie l'applicabilité, les bienfaits et les risques inhérents de la recherche-action entreprise par les enseignants, discute ensuite de la façon dont ce paradigme s'articule et termine en proposant des possibilités pour l'avenir.

The ability to control the production and distribution of knowledge becomes one of the most important sources of power ... Those who control production of knowledge also control the definition of truth, and in turn, the definition of reality. This—the ability to define reality—constitutes the fundamental source of power within the structure of domination. (LeCompte & de Marrais, 1992, p. 15)

Who Defines Adult Literacy Education?

Adult literacy education has been described as one of the most myth-laden fields in education (Cook, 1977; Fingeret, 1983, 1984; Quigley, 1997a). Low-literate adult learners have been stereotyped as a fallen-away group in a state of deficit and adult literacy education has been considered the "remedial quick fix" that can cure them (Armove & Graff, 1987; Quigley, 1997a). Myths that influence and effectively control the practice of adult literacy education have been described by Quigley in terms of two perspectives: a popular perspective fostered by the media and a political perspective articulated in literacy policy. The first perspective has been argued to be a romanticized perception of illiterate adults as heroic victims in need of rescue. The political perspective has been discussed as a hegemony apparent in literacy policy and political rhetoric that has historically portrayed the phenomenon of illiteracy as a burden on the public economy and an inherent threat to the social order. Taken together these two perspectives have tended to work against new ways of seeing and new

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approaches to literacy practice. The implications of this history are many but, as discussed in the adult literacy literature, (Armove & Graff, 1987; Fingeret, 1989), there has been a distinct tendency for literacy campaigns and programs across North America to take on a remarkable sameness, although there is little or no standardization of literacy/basic education teacher training or curricula across North America. If adult literacy practitioners are to engage seriously in a clearer articulation of their own reality, and in a critical discourse concerning their own field, improved ways need to be found to create and distribute critical knowledge to guide this field into the next century.

The broader context of literacy education may be more fully understood if the founding research on adult low-literates is added as a third hegemonic influence on literacy practice. Much of the early research on low-literate "characteristics" and "lack of motivation" (Beder, 1990; Fingeret, 1984; Quigley, 1997a) and some more current literature shows how adult low-literates are often presented in stereotypical ways. Reissman (Cross, 1982), for instance, reached the conclusion in 1962 that low literate adults are stereotypically lazy and responsible for their own situation. According to Reisman—and many both before and after him—low literate adults are naturally among the "culturally deprived," displaying "practically no interest in knowledge for its own sake" (p. 55). Other writers, such as those discussed by Anderson and Niemi (1970), those referenced by Mezirow, Darkenwald, and Knox (1975), and Irish (1980) have helped to reinforce such stereotypes in more or less direct ways. This research legacy has historically helped to overshadow more recent studies that directly challenge such myths. Beder (1990), for instance, in his comprehensive review of the participation literature, concluded that "it can be inferred that in respect to kinds of motivations exhibited, ABE students differ very little from the general population" (p. 65). Despite these findings, the legacy of literacy research has given the field of adult literacy education a stigmatized population, which by extension has also helped create a marginalized field of practice (Beder, 1990; Quigley, 1997a).

As Bourdieu (1971) has pointed out, "Reality is not an absolute ... it differs with the group to which one belongs" (p. 195). The popular, political, and research perspectives have contributed to a literacy "reality" not of the field's own making. Scholars such as Fingeret (1983, 1984), Beder (1990), and Quigley (1997a) have argued for space for the voices of those who live literacy education on a daily basis, namely, the practitioners and the learners. They argue that learners and practitioners should be encouraged, even assisted where necessary, in "naming their world," as Freire (1977) phrased it. Fingeret, for instance, has argued that practitioners should not adopt a "deficit" concept of learners. Beder (1990) has shown how "Stigmas are supported by stigma myths, a series of beliefs and attitudes about the stigmatized that justify negative behavior towards them" (p. 70), and Quigley (1997a) has argued that literacy practitioners, together with learners, should develop a *counter-hegemony* against the pervasive political and popular perspectives. Quigley (1997a) argues: "It should not be acceptable that macro-level myths oversimplify our practice as well as our learners" (p. 242).

Given the difficulty of working against the popular myths of adult literacy education, the question becomes how—and if—practitioners and learners can

begin to identify and produce their own knowledge constructed out of their own reality. The following explores the need for increased research-in-practice in adult literacy, examines the potential for this line of advocacy, and gives an account of some significant activities already underway that are moving research-in-practice toward becoming a grassroots force for counterhegemony for the field.

The Potential of Practitioner Action Research

Over the past decade there has been increasing advocacy for practitioner action research publications and practice-based activities across mainstream adult education (Merriam & Simpson, 1995; Millar, 1994). Participatory research (McTaggart, 1991; Whyte, 1991), collaborative research (Clift, Veal, Johnson, & Holland, 1990; Tom & Sork, 1994; Torbert, 1981), and forms of action-based inquiry (Watkins & Brooks, 1994)—here generically referred to as “research-in-practice”—are examples of the growing trend. Taken together, the multiple initiatives at the grassroots level conducted by practitioners either in collaboration with academics or without their involvement can be seen as a new research capacity and a growing voice for practitioners and learners. Despite critics such as Blunt (1994) and Garrison (1994) who are concerned that academic research may become overly committed to “applied research” in this way, the fact is that an enhanced knowledge base out of a field-based, critical way of seeing is being advanced through the literature and field-based activities. This trend toward research-in-practice is growing apace in adult literacy education. As discussed below, this is an exciting and significant trend for adult literacy, for mainstream adult education, and, I would argue, for university-based adult educators and researchers.

The Applicability of Practitioner Action Research to Adult Literacy

One of the many problems in adult literacy education is that it still tends to reproduce schooling in many respects—including staff development (Giroux, 1983; Quigley & Kuhne, 1997). The most familiar staff development and professional development model in adult literacy is what is now facetiously being termed the *come-and-get-'em workshops*, meaning that much of the traditional preparatory and professional development of literacy teachers and tutors in adult literacy is organized as expert-driven workshops, seminars, and short courses. Here an identified need is “addressed” by a workshop somewhere within commuting distance of local ABLE practitioners by someone who is considered to have some expertise on the topic (Pugsley, 1993). Although clearly valuable in many respects, this “received knowledge” can decontextualize knowledge from the real problems and lived experiences of participants. Such an approach has been repeatedly challenged for adult education on pedagogical grounds by many in mainstream adult education because, as researchers such as Brookfield (1990) and Wlodkowski (1988) have pointed out, simply presenting information can have questionable value for the way adults prefer to learn. Knowles' (1980) longstanding work on andragogy raises multiple questions about the assumptions inherent in this classic preparatory-professional development model. Further, for literacy education, which has a high proportion of women as practitioners and an even higher proportion of female students (Beder, 1994; Pugsley, 1993), one needs to ask if come-and-get-

'em expert workshops are truly the best way to build on women's collaborative learning styles (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986).

Besides inherent pedagogical and learning style questions, one must ask if the constructs *professional development* and *teacher preparation* even apply to a paraprofessional and volunteer-driven field of practice (Whitehead, 1989). Unlike those in so much of public school education staff development, those who attend literacy and basic education workshops rarely realize career advancement, pay raises, or even enhanced job security as a result of staff development. Further, given how geographically dispersed adult basic and literacy practitioners are—teaching in cities, towns, villages, and farms using virtually any workable facility—it becomes extremely difficult to reach practitioners. The notion of conducting a detailed needs analysis, a postworkshop follow-up, or one-on-one methods such as mentoring in such wide geographic areas is extremely difficult for many of the literacy programs in Canada and the United States.

By contrast, practitioner action research works to empower practitioners with the skills to research their own practice for the purpose of improving daily practice and personal skills (Argyris, 1989; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). It does not insist on a classic professional development model and does not assume that practitioners will be working in structured, school-like classrooms. Because such research accommodates individual projects, practitioners from tutors to teachers to administrators who may be working across wide geographic regions can work through questions over months at a time without waiting for the next workshop. However, the model of practitioner action research being discussed here does not assume isolation. It argues that networks of peers—research friends—are vital to research success.

This research model typically offers a professional development dimension that both empowers the practitioner to learn from his or her daily practice and produces practical knowledge that can be shared with other practitioners (Whitehead, 1989). It seeks to improve practice and the institution through incremental steps. By enhancing practitioners' skills in problem-posing/problem-solving, by creating critical networks of dialogue, and communities of support, the issues *practitioners* identify can lead to institutional change as well as to levels of personal transformation. Practitioner action research not only often develops the skills and confidence needed to identify and address one's *own* problems, but can also set into motion a counterhegemony of critical analysis that can make new topics and questions askable for the first time. "This is always what we have done here" and "Everyone knows what illiterates are like" can become openings for critical analysis and systematic questioning.

The Impact of Practitioner Action Research

One of the most extensive recent publications on practitioner action research in a community setting involving adult literacy is Hautecoeur's *Alpha 94* (1994). A UNESCO publication, this book reports on action research as used in 16 countries. Throughout it is clear that action research challenged many myths and made countless questions askable for the first time. These countries are categorized by the editor as follows: "southern Europe (Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece, France, Belgium, and the United Kingdom), central Europe (the Czech

Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary), North America (Canada, the U.S.), with two deliberate detours, to Canada's Northwest Territories and Chile" (p. 3). The various projects described in this book sought to address rural community issues related to adult literacy education. Groups as diverse as the Gypsy Cultural Association in Bratislava, two groups of First Nations in Canada, communities in the Appalachian region, work by a Turkish community in Luxembourg, and self-described peasants in Chile are all discussed in the words of the respective participants. Throughout, as Hautecoeur explains, "The starting point [was] the local community: its context, history, discourse, experience, plans, knowledge" (p. 2). Similar practitioner action research projects in various developing countries as well as in North America have been reported on through time (Hall, Gillette, & Tandon, 1982; Quigley & Kuhne, 1997). Indeed, as the literature is reviewed the line blurs between definitions of *practitioner action research* and *popular education* (Torres & Fischman, 1994). However, irrespective of differences among the group of approaches, the examples given here speak directly to the enhancement of critical analysis among practitioners with or without the assistance of university-based action researchers. In this collective, grassroots activity, the counterhegemonic strength of this process in bringing about personal, community, and regional change in literacy practice is impressive.

Action research has been reported in numerous institutionalized settings across North America as well. Often practitioner action research is used in these institutions for professional development as well as for problem resolution. The results of these activities are often disseminated through various public and professional networks. Kuhne and Quigley (1997), for instance, report on six case studies in adult education settings ranging from a church, to a homeless shelter, to a university distance education project where practitioner action research was used. Whyte (1991) has edited a collection of participatory action research projects in corporate settings, including Xerox Company. Although not one of these projects took internal structural change as its first or primary objective, they do offer this potential. For instance, action research in an institutional context has been shown by authors such as Elden and Gjersvik (1994) as a viable means toward democratizing the work place.

Irrespective of the setting or primary purpose, it is consistently clear that participatory action research has the potential to influence—if not transform—the researcher, the research participants, their collective work or activities, the setting they are part of, and the culture they share. However, what is not often discussed in any depth is the personal transformation many have experienced. As Peters (1997) comments: "The [action] researcher should be as much a focus of reflection as the method and results" (p. 71). The following is an example of impact evaluations from Pennsylvania that includes evidence of personal change through critical reflection.

Three Impact Evaluation Studies on the Value of Action Research

Quigley and Doyle (1997a) report on a follow-up study of "lasting effect" conducted in Pennsylvania with 16 literacy practitioner-researchers 12 months after they had completed their first action research project with the Pennsylvania Action Research Network. A year later, 75% of this group reported that program changes initiated as a result of their action research projects were still

continuing. A total of 44% had seen lasting changes across broad agencies as a result of their work. A full 94% said they "now look at problems in a more systematic way as a result of action research" (p. 6), and 100% felt action research was more job-relevant than traditional workshop training. To validate these findings further, a second study from their supervisors' viewpoint was conducted by the same researchers (Quigley & Doyle, 1997b). The supervisors, seven in total (none of whom had conducted an action research project or attended an action research orientation for training), were asked to discuss what they saw in their teacher/tutor as a result of their involvement with action research a year before. In their view, 42% "saw a difference" (p. 4) between the benefits attained by the staff who had attended traditional staff development and those who had participated in action research. A full 57% said they could see "an attitude change" in those who had participated in action research, adding that those who had participated were now "more open minded," that they had "developed a different professional rapport," and now "tended to [be] more of the leaders." A total of 43% of the supervisors could name positive lasting institutional impacts, and all said they would definitely allocate training money for action research in the future. Five of the group of seven said they would like all their staff to learn how to conduct action research, and most said they would definitely allocate from a quarter to 50% of their training budget for action research in the future. A third evaluation study conducted at project end after year two of the Pennsylvania Action Research Network's activities reported that 94% of 16 respondents said, "Action research is a valuable way to resolve practice problems" (Quigley, 1997b), and all the participants at project end said, "Action research is a valuable way to add new knowledge to the field."

If practitioner action research holds particular promise for adult literacy education, it becomes important that the field be able to define it and use it—a task that is much more difficult than may first appear.

An Overview of Action Research

The origin of action research has been credited to Kurt Lewin (Lewin, 1948; Weisbord, 1987), who in turn was influenced by John Dewey (Quigley & Kuhne, 1997). Action research has generally been considered in education contexts to be research carried out by practitioners with a view to improving their professional practice and understanding their practice better (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1990; Watkins & Brooks, 1994). It has been described by Catelli (1995) in the public school context as "the combined efforts of teachers, researchers, and teacher educators to engage in a systematic and 'critically' oriented process of inquiry, in order to understand and to improve some commonly agreed-upon dimensions of educational practice" (p. 27). Although definitions abound, action research is clearly a method of problem-posing and problem-solving whereby "the researcher aims to develop or improve people's actions, understandings and situations through collaborative action" (Kemmis, 1991, p. 61). Action research can be oversimplified to be seen as trial-and-error, because when using this research strategy an adult education practitioner-researcher tries an intervention, then after observing and reflecting on the outcomes typically tries yet another variation of the intervention (Argyris, 1989). However, as explained by Quigley and Kuhne (1997),

Action research is much more than merely "trial and error" because it incorporates systematic procedures that combine analysis, observation, and data collection into the process. The systematic use of analysis, observation, and data collection procedures enables action research to hold the potential to achieve useful answers to practice problems. More than this, action research also has the potential of having its findings applied in similar practice-settings across the country. (p. 23)

For Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), action research is

Trying new ideas in practice as a means of improvement and as a means of increasing knowledge about the curriculum, teaching, and learning. The result is improvement in what happens in the classroom ... a better articulation and justification of the educational rationale for what goes on. Action research provides a way of working which links theory and practice into the one whole: ideas-in-action. (p. 5)

By being able to provide a better articulation and justification of the educational rationale for what goes on, a clear, pragmatic benefit for practitioner action researchers is that they can build better arguments for resources, for program improvements, and for institutional change. Practitioners have used this pragmatic value as the "buy-in" when talking with literacy administrators and funding agencies. However, as the above discussion indicates, practitioner action research is a process of critical analysis that has the potential to pose radical questions and bring about major changes in more levels than the institution itself (McTaggart, 1991). This point is taken up in the following section by focusing on activities in adult literacy typically in institutional settings. It begins with a brief overview of the background of action research in the public school system in the US. It is significant because it suggests what some of the inherent risks are in increasing the use of practitioner action research in adult literacy.

Action Research in Adult Literacy Settings

The movement for practitioner action research has been gaining momentum rapidly in recent years. It is being used widely by teachers and tutors in the US on a statewide basis in both Virginia (Cockley, 1993) and Pennsylvania (Quigley, 1997b). Practitioner action research has been used for over a decade on an institutionally sponsored basis out of Columbia Teachers College in New York with their Promising Practices program, and action research has become a strength for international literacy with Cornell University's education program (Shafer, 1995). It has been used extensively in a number of adult education and literacy organizations across California (McDonald, 1994) and has played a vital role in changing programs and policies in various parts of North America through North Carolina's Literacy South organization (Pates, 1992). In most of these examples, practitioner action research has become, or is becoming, a counterhegemonic force for practice change, institutional change, professional change, and incremental change at the level of public and policy hegemony.

Meanwhile, practitioner action research has become a major part of both literacy knowledge production and literacy professional development in Australia. The Queensland government commissioned a series of practitioner

action research projects in 1966 entitled *Research Into Practice*. Collaborative action research between university researchers and literacy practitioners is under way in the Northern Territory. A thematic approach to literacy issues has been encouraged in South Australia through action research, and a variety of action research models are being used in the states of Victoria and Western Australia. The Australian federal government provided \$1 million to establish "state nodes" in all states so, among other purposes, practitioner action research can be shared, discussed, and disseminated. A further federal grant of \$250,000 was allocated in 1996 to enhance the Adult Literacy Research Network under the National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia (Network Notes, 1996). In Canada interest in practitioner action research is building, and in October 1997 the Learning Centre Literacy Association in Edmonton hosted a symposium of literacy leaders from across Canada under the sponsorship of the National Literacy Secretariat. Practitioners and academics from virtually every province and territory met to discuss the potential of this approach. An online discussion group followed under the leadership of the Edmonton Centre, and various plans are underway for implementing this approach in various provinces and territories. Looking back, a project known as the Ontario Field Research Group began several years ago with support from the Ontario government, and later from the Ontario Literacy Coalition. It has since dissolved as a formal entity, but the network of those interested in practitioner action has continued.

Practitioner action research has found acceptance as a methodology in the theses and dissertations of adult education graduate students in various Canadian university adult education graduate programs. However, efforts to enhance adult literacy practice or reform the myths of literacy in Canada are still in the building stages. Unlike Australia or the US, no formalized network, wide dissemination systems, or programs of activities have yet emerged. It is hoped that this situation will change, as practitioner action research may well be one of this field's best hopes for the 21st century.

The Future of Research-in-Practice

Practitioners often find that "doing a good job" is just not enough. Evaluation and accountability pressures have continued to grow through the 1990s (Beder, 1990). Often practitioners simply cannot show improved cost-effectiveness or practical gain simply because they lack the data and systematic means to gain evidence. Anecdotes and statements of need are rarely enough to justify real change at the institutional or policy level. From local boards to the federal government, practitioners need to be able to convince decision-makers that they can make improvements. In this respect, research can make an enormous difference and a critical mass of data across an institution or region can provide a case for broad-based changes. Creating research-based knowledge can provide practitioners with new ways to engage critically with old problems—from practice questions to negative stereotypes about learners. Above all, practitioners and their learners can begin to voice their own realities through action research. They can begin to create and own their own knowledge for practical change and they can begin to build momentum for public and policy change with supportive data. The field of literacy practice—teachers, tutors, counselors, administrators, and learners alike—can begin to see more critically and

can define their own reality more clearly. If the promise offered by practitioner research can be realized, we will be on the road to controlling our own destiny in the next century.

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