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# Using Metaphors to Depict Canada's Adult Literacy Research Since the Mid-1980s

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**Abstract:** This study examined the evolution in adult literacy research since the founding of *The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education (CJSAE)* and the rise of the contemporary knowledge base in Canadian adult literacy. Three research questions guided the investigation which employed a critical discourse analysis (CDA) method. A text analysis grid was constructed and was used across several data sources representing Canadian literacy scholarship. Results indicate that seven metaphors can be used to depict the current state of literacy scholarship. These findings shape a triangle of three solitudes: academic researchers, practitioners, and government sponsors.

## Introduction

Adult literacy education has played an historical role in shaping both the current field of adult education and the very nation of Canada itself. However, it was not until the 1970s and the influx of federal training dollars for adult upgrading that literacy research saw a marked growth (Draper, 1989; Taylor, 2001; Quigley, 2007; Quigley, Folinsbee, Kraglund-Gauthier, 2006). This study investigated how literacy scholarship has been shaped since the founding of the CJSAE with a central focus from the mid-1980s and the rise of the contemporary literacy knowledge base to the present day.

Using a tiered model of critical discourse analysis, three salient questions were posed for this study: (1) How has the field of adult literacy scholarship been shaped since the mid-1980s? (2) What are the predominant discourses presented by academic researchers, practitioners, and government sponsors in the literacy knowledge base through this major period of development? (3) How are the lines of support or disconnect represented by these three stakeholders?

## Focused Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

### *Creating a Literacy Knowledge Base*

Adult literacy education has consistently been sponsored by a major stakeholder- funding agencies, philanthropic groups, or individuals. These efforts since the mid-19th century have, in turn, typically been motivated by overt religious, economic, and/or political goals through to today (Arnove & Graff, 1987). Such sponsored purposes have long created tensions with, and among, professional, paraprofessional, and volunteer literacy practitioners—literacy's second major stakeholder voice in this study. Completing the three-stakeholder triangle, adult education and adult literacy researchers in both academic and non-academic settings have made the third major set of contributions to the contemporary knowledge base. However, just as the three

corners of the triangle have effectively shaped and created the literacy knowledge base, so have they, in turn, helped to create layers of ambiguity and tension between and among themselves.

Whether it is the relentless debate over how to define “literacy,” “literacies,” basic education, essential skills or the plethora of social constructs which have plagued literacy in Canada (Quigley, 2006; Taylor, Ayala, & Pinsent-Johnson, 2009), or the complexities of policies, purposes, and pedagogical methods that undergird this field, inherent to this triangle is the firm belief that each group is acting in the best interests of adult literacy learners. Each stakeholder has, meanwhile, sought through time to inform and influence the others—either directly or indirectly—on “What is best for adult literacy learners” despite the fact that the learners’ voice has rarely been heard (Quigley, 2006). How this discourse has evolved, what it suggests for the future of adult literacy, and the very composition of who shapes and, perhaps will shape, the literacy literature and the future of our field is the focus of this investigation.

### *Critical Discourse Analysis as a Theory*

Discussing language, discourse, and education in post modern conditions, Luke (1996) traces critical discourse analysis from a poststructuralist, neo-Marxian, feminist theory and critical linguistic framework. He suggests that there have been three broad theoretical movements that have influenced discourse based studies in education. The first he refers to as the psycholinguistics movement which was an explicitly language-based area such as the development and learning of English as a second language. This was followed by work in sociolinguistics which stressed the social character of language use. The third and most recent era towards discourse studies is based on the poststructuralist analyses of social history and contemporary culture by Michel Foucault. Furthermore, the current work of both van Leeuwen (2008) and van Dijk (2008) are steeped in this more recent perspective and were instrumental as a lens in developing the theoretical approach for this study.

Although the literature is replete with multiple meanings of critical discourse analysis, Rogers (2004), and Bloor and Bloor (2007) have helped clarify this by explaining that CDA is an area of critical applied linguistics that encompasses both a theory and a method. As a starting point for researchers interested in conducting CDA, Fairclough and Wodak (1997) suggested a number of foundational principles for its use as a theory. They believe that CDA addresses social problems and that a sociocognitive approach is needed to understand how relations between texts and society are mediated. Writing about the intentions of critical discourse analysis and what makes it “critical,” Corson (2000) and Weiss and Wodak (2003) both argue that the work of the analyst is to uncover the power relationships and to demonstrate the inequalities embedded in the social context. These key foundational principles were used as the cornerstones in developing both the theoretical and methodological frame for the study.

### **Methodology**

For the purposes of this study, Fairclough’s (1992, 1999, 2003) analytical procedures were modified and included a three tiered model of discursive relations and social practices. To assist in the CDA for this study, a text analysis grid was constructed that contained 12 elements. At the descriptive and instrumental levels, the micro features of the text such as vocabulary, genre, exchange, and grammatical mood were examined. The focus of the second level of analysis was interpretation, where the linguistic features described in the previous stage were interpreted with reference to the meaning of the text. Explanation was the final phase of analysis

and attempted to interpret the social phenomenon of literacy and how it was conceptualized within the given domains of academic, practitioner and governmental research

The primary data source was the entire set of issues of *The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education (CJSAE)* from 1987 to 2010. For each of the 46 issues of the journal, five genres were used to classify content: individual research articles, references in these articles, the “Perspectives” section, book reviews, and the “Graduate Degrees in Canada” section. Three sweeps of the data collection were made. The first sweep involved 29 journal issues from 1987 to 2001. The second focused on the special 2001 *CJSAE* issue dedicated to literacy: Volume 15, Issue 2. This issue consisted of 11 research articles, six book reviews, and a list of graduate degrees in Canada. This special issue served as a benchmark for examining the contributions to literacy to this point and provided a means for critically analyzing the third sweep of the remaining 16 journal issues from 2002 to 2010.

To deepen this analysis, secondary data sources were employed. All 10 issues of the *Literacies* journal, spanning 2003 to 2009, were reviewed, and 116 articles were selected for discourse analysis based on review criteria. Secondly, a review of Canada’s literacy coalitions and association websites was conducted to locate Research-in-Practice (RiP) postings (Quigley & Norton, 2002). That search yielded 31 RiP reports and e-books (retrieved to August 30, 2010). Finally, the *State of the Field Report: Adult Literacy* (Quigley et al., 2006) was analyzed as another secondary data source. This report includes approximately 1,200 literacy-relevant entries dating from the mid-1970s, and is the most comprehensive critical review of Canadian adult literacy literature to date. Since the largest proportion of the entries in the report was written by, or under the auspices of, Canadian governments and their partners, these entries were seen as representative of a collected government perspective on contemporary adult literacy.

### **Findings and Conclusions**

In an attempt to understand how the field of adult literacy research has evolved since the mid-1980s, a critical discourse analysis of *CJSAE* revealed that each of the three major discourses has shaped a unique contribution out of its own context and reality. The findings are presented as six distinct metaphors to depict the findings of an in-depth critical discourse analysis of issues of *CJSAE* since its conception in 1987. These six metaphors represent the evolution that has occurred in the field of adult literacy in the last 30 years.

From the first data sweep of *CJSAE* (1987–2001), three metaphors emerged: literacy as emancipation, literacy as commodity, and a glimpse of literacy as social practice. The most prominent metaphor during the first data sweep was *literacy as a means of emancipation*. Authors explored critical pedagogy as a means for teaching literacy and as a way to challenge and question dominant systems. The common thread that highlighted literacy as emancipation is that all encompass the praxis of overcoming oppression through action and interaction, whether the focus was on improving living conditions in developing countries, the experience of French Canadians, the importance of vocational education, or the empowerment of women to name but a few. Pieces such as these few examples made a clear connection between the struggle for power and democracy as inextricable linked to literacy as a form of emancipation.

The second metaphor that emerged depicts *literacy as a commodity*. Literacy is presented as a portable commodity that can be effectively packaged and delivered as an intervention for curing unemployment. This human capital view of basic adult literacy as remedial education continues, arguably, to marginalize disenfranchised groups of workers and learners. Many of the pieces that developed this metaphor focused on recent immigrants and linguistic minority

groups. Findings presented the viewpoint that, in the rise of the so-called new knowledge economy throughout the 1990s, the acquisition of more skills and upgrading by workers is the human capital answer that will not only help the economy, but also put employers in charge of learning, thus keeping power in the hands of those who ostensibly run the economy.

A third metaphor in this first sweep was a glimpse of *literacy as social practice* although it was only with an in-depth look that a hint in the undertone could be found. There were a few articles which, through a social constructivist lens, called for practitioners to adopt a conscious teaching style and tailor literacy programs to acknowledge the realities of learners' daily lives. Such practice-based strategies were also evident in studies which dealt with workplace learning, transformative learning, program evaluation, informal learning, and distance education. Despite the development of this metaphor, very few researchers personally reflected on their own practice in the field of literacy education.

The fourth metaphor emerged from *CJSAE's* 2001 special issue on literacy and was termed *opening the door on sociocultural literacy learning* in order to emphasize the contributions to literacy theory building and areas requiring further development. In this data sweep, the social constructivist learning approach was viewed as a building block toward the development of literacy theory. Articles that supported this metaphor presented collaborative learning and the classroom interactions as central to literacy development. There was inherent attention to the learner's life roles as the driving force behind curriculum planning and emphasis on personal and social adult development. Another common thread was the contextual nature of literacy, pointing out that the literacy identity of learners often occurs through critical reflection and collaborative action based on an emancipatory pedagogy. This metaphor also was informed by the introduction of the idea that social capital among literacy instructors is different than with other types of vocational instructors and requires a sociocultural framework.

For the third more recent period of *CJSAE* (2002–2010), two metaphors were developed: literacy as critical social practice, and literacy as a continuum of formal and informal learning. Emerging from the final sweep, the earlier metaphor of a glimpse of literacy as social practice was critically expanded. The metaphor of *literacy as critical social practice* demonstrates the pivotal role played by emancipation in academic adult literacy learning research. Collectively, authors who presented literacy as a critical social practice discussed the need to foster greater self-efficacy among adult literacy learners. Adult learners will face significant barriers to adult learning outside the workplace just as adult educators will face immense challenges to meet the needs of diverse learners.

The sixth, and final, metaphor that was gleaned from *CJSAE* was *literacy as a continuum of formal and informal learning*. The tension between formal and informal learning was brought to light through the demand for increased accountability in adult education. The common way that terms like *systematization* and *streamlining* were used brought researchers to question why informal and self-directed learning were not seen as important as formal literacy learning.

Collectively, the gradual evolution of the six metaphors was indicative of a trend in adult literacy toward greater epistemological sophistication. In addition, the rise of the most recent metaphors (from 2002–2010), together with the pedagogical popularity of constructivism, situated learning, and collaboration brought the issues and the theoretical constructs closer to literacy practice and the lives of learners. Despite the interconnectedness of these six metaphors, and in the light of a dearth of dialogue, collaboration, and co-authorship, academic research trends have yet to connect with the practitioners' strongly stated metaphor of literacy as relationship. Reflecting on the close proximity found between the academic and the practitioner

research, we ask where the next stage in evolution will take adult literacy research in Canada.

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