

2017

## Reinventing Translation: Toward a Common Language for Scholar-Practitioners

Ann Kowal Smith

*Books@Work (That Can Be Me, Inc.)*, anksmith@thatcanbeme.org

Karen R. Nestor

*Books@Work (That Can Be Me, Inc.)*, krnestor@me.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.case.edu/emr>



Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Commons](#), [Modern Literature Commons](#), [Organizational Behavior and Theory Commons](#), [Organization Development Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Reading and Language Commons](#), and the [Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

### Recommended Citation

Smith, Ann Kowal and Nestor, Karen R. (2017) "Reinventing Translation: Toward a Common Language for Scholar-Practitioners," *Engaged Management ReView*. Vol. 1 : Iss. 2 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.28953/2375-8643.1029>

<https://commons.case.edu/emr/vol1/iss2/2>

This Translation Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Weatherhead School of Management at Scholarly Commons @ Case Western Reserve University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Engaged Management ReView by an authorized editor of Scholarly Commons @ Case Western Reserve University. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@case.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@case.edu).

---

## Reinventing Translation: Toward a Common Language for Scholar-Practitioners

### Cover Page Footnote

The authors thank Professor Kalle Lyytinen for his time, advice and counsel as this paper took shape.

#### EDITORIAL NOTE

Ann Kowal Smith's and Karen Nestor's article "Reinventing Translation: Toward a Common Language for Scholar-Practitioners" is the first translation paper in *EMR*. The purpose of translation articles is to examine how research results, designs or methods are being applied and 'translated' into practical outcomes by practitioner-scholars in the 'swing of things'. The articles are empirical in the sense that they show by using empirical evidence how research results are 'fed' back into action settings and how they shape or fail to do so management action. This article carries all the signs of a good translation article, which I had in mind when we established this genre in *EMR*. Smith's and Nestor's study setting—how employees read and discuss books in a guided setting in their work place—is itself an example of the first level translation. But they show how this simple translation has rich and far reaching effects on individuals' confidence, cognition and identity and consequently on organizational cognition, absorptive capacity, social bonding and performance. They follow this cascade of effects through a third type of translation in which they use qualitative, grounded theory based dialogue research techniques which they learned as part of their research training. They show how these scholarly competencies help them analyze and make sense of such processes and use it to influence the effectiveness of future translation interventions and of practice itself—an example of true engaged scholarship and action research carried out by practitioners! As a result, the article is rich in detail and provides original insight, inviting the reader to follow these multilevel translations triggered by the initially innocent desire to get people around the table and to discuss well written and touching prose. Lastly, the article is emblematic of the subject matter of Books@Work's mission—it is beautifully written and crafted. I hope that it invites all to read this simple story of people who read books at the work to discuss them and what this actually comes to mean to them and for the rest of us.

## Reinventing Translation: Toward a Common Language for Scholar-Practitioners

**Ann Kowal Smith**  
Books@Work

**Karen R. Nestor**  
Books@Work

#### ABSTRACT

Translation starts in one language, and converts to a second. But it doesn't change the languages or the people who "speak" them. We propose – instead of translation – the joint development of theory and practice that becomes a *common language*, a common language of a community of scholar-practitioners. This paper describes the work of two scholar-practitioners committed to addressing a pressing problem of practice: the educational attainment and skills required for positive outcomes in the 21st century workplace. This paper examines the original design and implementation of an innovative, theory-based workplace learning initiative called Books@Work, and, arising from this work, proposes a research methodology that integrates theory and practice in a complex, emergent form of engaged scholarship. The authors propose the use of a single lens to join theory and practice in a seamless partnership between scholars and practitioners – and program participants themselves – engaged in a joint effort to solve practice problems and to shape a more integrated, reformulated, view of scholar-practice.

## INTRODUCTION

Kurt Lewin once wrote, “There is nothing so practical as a good theory.” (Lewin, 1943, p. 118, cited in Weick, 1951). This statement comes to life in Books@Work, an innovative workplace learning initiative steeped in principles of engaged scholarship. Traditionally, “translation” means the practical application of a research finding observed in scholarship. In this paper, we propose a new and different process to generate important connections between scholarship and practice, one that moves from translation between two distinct “languages” to a bilinguality that includes critical elements of both to simultaneously inform research and social outcomes. In short, we propose a new language altogether.

Although our collaboration began as an exploration of translation as traditionally conceived, our shared experience convinced us that this traditional conception was insufficient to capture the integrated contributions to practice and research arising from the design and implementation of the Books@Work program. Books@Work brings professor-led literature seminars into workplaces and community settings. Discussing narrative literature, Books@Work participants challenge assumptions, share their stories, experience mutual recognition and practice critical dialogue. This interactive process is not based on theory derived in the “lab” and applied to practice – it’s the messy marriage of theory and practice merged to create a novel learning intervention, reflecting the transformational nature of adult learning and the impact such learning has within an organization.

This paper proposes a reformulation of practitioner-scholarship that has emerged from our work with theory and practice. First, it describes the invention and development of Books@Work, emerging from pressing problems of practice and heavily influenced by our understanding of those problems from scholarly literature and our own research over time. Second, it explores a modified grounded theory

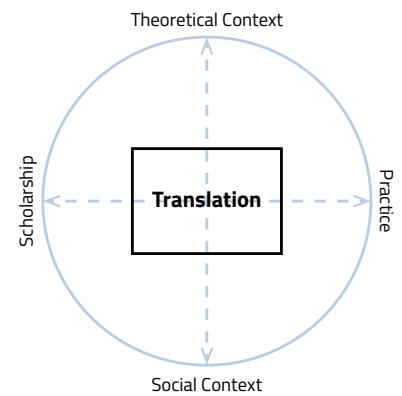
methodology used to illustrate how the program’s practice outcomes *and* theoretical implications emerge and evolve in tandem. The evidence gained from this research provides real-time insights to continually refine the program, while contributing to scholarship in adult and organizational learning. These efforts, taken together, illustrate a constant flow of inquiry in the space created by two dialectical axes: theoretical and social contexts, and scholarship and practice (see Figure 1).

As scholarship-grounded practitioners, we designed Books@Work as a theory-guided approach to adult learning in the workplace; and as practice-based scholars we conducted research to understand the impact of that program in real people’s lives and within the ongoing theoretical dialogue. Along the way, we discovered a complex, fluid process that invited us to invent a new approach – a new common language – built on our experiences of practice, informed by our doctoral studies in scholar-practitioner programs. As we worked, we saw that the double lenses of scholarship and practice had become a single lens whose aperture continually captured both theoretical and social contexts, turning our work into one emergent picture of integrated scholar-practice. In short, practice and scholarship develop together; the scholar and the practitioner become one and the same in a complex, emergent formulation of engaged scholarship.

## THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

The United States is deeply bifurcated: individuals who are less educated face shrinking incomes, fewer opportunities and dimmer prospects while their more highly-educated peers are more likely to prosper. This gap weighs heavily on US competitiveness. Growing an adaptable and resilient workforce remains a significant problem of practice, especially when we cannot forecast job needs (or even categories) beyond the near-term (Lahart, 2010).

Figure 1



Employers lament their employees’ lack of necessary skills for workplace success, especially the skills widely understood as outcomes of a high quality college education. These competencies, or habits of mind, include communication, work ethic, social responsibility, collaboration, reading comprehension, diversity and critical thinking (The Conference Board, 2006). Yet, educational attainment among U.S. adults remains below desired targets, even among younger cohorts. The 2015 U.S. Census Data reveals that only 32% of American adults 25 and older have attained a bachelor’s degree; in many areas and for certain minority groups, the number is far lower. Most of these adults are in the workforce.

Within this context, the authors’ long, dual career paths – as scholars (Ann with an emphasis in management and Karen with an emphasis in education) *and* as management and education professionals – led us to question traditional views of scholarship and practice. We each came to doctoral studies later in our careers with a commitment to scholarship as an essential element of innovative practice; we collaborated as we simultaneously evolved Books@Work and developed our dissertations. Our research studies used variations of grounded theory, one focused at the micro/individual level of analysis (Nestor, 2015) and one at the meso/organizational level (Smith, 2010). The combination of our research and our practice deepened

our understanding of the power of engaged scholarship (Appendix A).

Ann developed the original concept for Books@Work as a consultant to a community effort seeking to address educational attainment challenges. As an intervention, the program affords workplace-based adults access to a meaningful college-level learning experience designed to help them grow personally and professionally as well as individually and collectively. From a research perspective, the program offers access to a diverse set of individuals whose lived experiences provide valuable data for understanding the role of learning in the workplace, and the extent to which that experience shapes individual, team and organizational outcomes.

### **The Books@Work Model**

Books@Work recruits and guides college and university professors to deliver high-quality content to learners in non-traditional spaces: the workplace and the community (Appendix B). Using fiction and narrative nonfiction, Books@Work participants investigate essential questions, explore diverse perspectives and life experiences, and find their voice. A typical three-month series exposes participants to one text each month, in weekly seminars with three different professors.

With a commitment to social change, Books@Work partners with companies to offer their least-educated employees an opportunity to read and discuss literature alongside the most-educated employees, using narrative texts to break down cross-hierarchical barriers and boost individual and collective skills. Exploring human relationships through literature need not, and *should* not, be limited to managers; high-quality narrative literature invites *all* readers— from the management suite to the shop floor – to reflect on their own life experiences.

The central concept of Books@Work lies in narrative itself – beginning with the text, extending to the shared stories of the individuals around the seminar table and ending with the collective language emerging from the group’s interpretation and discussion. Unlike a college literature course, the narrative text in a Books@Work seminar is not “on the table” for examination and interpretation, but “at the table,” offering both a perspective on the human condition *and* the conversational space to explore issues rarely addressed in workplace settings. From a theoretical perspective, Meretoja (2017) asserts that reinterpreting “our everyday experiences, identities, and life plans in the light of . . . cultural narratives . . . can be seen to embody a ‘triple hermeneutic’” – because they offer the experience of interpreting “experiences that are already interpretations” (p. 82). In precisely this way, each program occasion the reinterpretation of literary narrative, personal narrative, and collective, cultural narrative within each context.

### **Books@Work as an Evidence-Based Practice**

Demands for evidence-based practice dominate program design, funding and evaluation, but those who seek evidence often perceive quantitative data as the most legitimate indicator of program impact. Before Books@Work could be quantitatively tested, however, we needed a holistic understanding of the lived experience of the program’s participants and the power of conversational spaces to nurture both individual and collective emergence. Finding the evidence to support our impact meant turning to the scholarly methods that had become second-nature in our doctoral studies.

We approached our data using grounded theory methodology to inductively build our understanding of the Books@Work experience rather than to deductively verify a set of preconceived hypotheses. Learning on our doctoral training, we recognized that theoretical inquiry could deepen our understandings, offering strategies to so-

cially construct participant meaning and exhorting us to develop theories from the data we gathered by exploring the *lived experience* of our participants (Charmaz, 2014). We developed our methodology in practice while studying the Books@Work phenomena in partnership with our participants, not only as informants but also as reflective thought partners. This approach sharpened our questions and opened the aperture to reveal insights we had not predicted.

The Books@Work team conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews with more than 500 participants, supervisors and professors in more than 40 organizations across sectors in 16 states and 5 foreign countries. These interviews provide a rich source of data: a compendium of the lived experience of the more than 4000 Books@Work participants since 2013. But the same data also helps the team to refine the program. As a result, the interview data demonstrates an essential element of our evolving understanding of the theory-building power of practice *and* the practice-building power of theory. Practice plays an important role in generating theory that both scholars and practitioners can use.

### **Data and Findings: The Lived Experience of Books@Work**

The interviews produced insights that clarified our understanding of Books@Work. Participants’ observations pointed to the value of multiple levels of narrative interpretation (the triple hermeneutic): literary narratives within the texts, life narratives of participants revealed in discussions, and collective narratives that groups shared and created. As Bruner (2004) wrote, “Narrative imitates life, life imitates narrative” (p. 692). Recent narrative scholarship confirms our original instincts that “life draws on narrative for resources to imagine our identity and to interpret others, situations, and the ‘real world’” (Schiff, McKim & Patron, 2017, p. xxxii).

Comparing responses within and across organizations, we identified recurring theoretical categories that shed light on the individual and collective impact of the program. We relied on a rigorous condensation of data to distill the meaning expressed by participants, initially by bracketing and coding events, behaviors, emotions, interactions, ideas, and concepts and then using memo writing and diagrams to capture our evolving thinking about the data (Charmaz, 2014). The open-ended questions characteristic of qualitative inquiry helped us move away from deductive hypotheses of *what might happen* in a learning intervention of this type to an abductive inquiry about *what actually happened* (Brinkmann, 2014).

Despite widely varied contexts, the interviews illustrate a number of themes that surfaced across companies, hierarchies, functions and educational backgrounds. Three themes stand out for their overwhelming consistency and frequency:

1. The combination of personal experience, individual reflection and literary narrative encourages participants to see themselves and each other in new ways
2. Books@Work forms a safe space for conversation that promotes discovery, adaptation and social connection
3. Participants develop shared language and a collective value system.

Because of the breadth of data, we have selected excerpts from interviews at a single manufacturing company (the "Company") to illustrate these findings. With just under 500 employees, the Company has hosted Books@Work for more than three years, with 35 to 40% of employees regularly participating in cross-functional and natural teams across the Company's hierarchy. The Company is committed to a culture that puts financial profit and the thriving of human beings on an equal footing. In the President's words, "We want a place where employees find the work to be profoundly enjoyable, intensely gratifying,

and truly developmental." We present the perspectives of three Company employees: the President, a senior manager and a front-line machinist.

*The combination of personal experience, individual reflection and literary narrative encourages participants to see themselves and each other in new ways*

Ms. A is the only female Machinist in the Company's production staff. Ms. A began Books@Work with her team of four hourly men and one salaried male supervisor. "I've worked with some of these gentlemen for four years, side by side with several of them . . . . We had pretty good communication prior to this, but it was always kind of shallow. We would talk. We would work together, solve our little problems that we were addressing day to day."

"The first book I read for Books@Work was a Hemingway book, *In Our Time*, and our professor taught us to read past what was written on the page... to see the story behind the story." Influenced by this idea, Ms. A describes a radical shift in her approach to books and written material: "Before I would read a book and now I'm **READING** the book. I'll never read a book the same way again."

Ms. A further notes that exploring "something else other than what's written" has provided her with new sensemaking skills beyond the texts:

"As a team coordinator, I have been able to take what some of the gentlemen that work with me tell me and look past what they're actually telling me because there's usually a story behind a story with people. I've been able to solve some of the problems I didn't know were there just by looking past what I was being told by them."

This expanded her view of the others on her team:

"I realized that there's a little more depth to some of these guys than I knew before, and hopefully they thought the same thing about me. It's been amazing how you think you know

somebody until you actually sit and you start to talk about stuff other than work stuff."

This newfound mutual respect and recognition of perspective led to sustainable change in their interpersonal interactions:

"[Before Books@Work] you would say or do something and it was black and white. After Books@Work, we've learned to respect one another's thoughts more than we did before. I've also noticed that we stop and actually have listened to what's being said by our other teammates. Before ... we always thought we were right regardless of what someone else had thought or said. I've learned that not just my opinion has changed. I think theirs has too, but I think our communication has grown. I think we've gotten a better understanding of one another, too."

Finally, Ms. A observes that the increased quality of her team's relationships: "We've solved a lot of stuff here at work that we would not have probably approached before. It's been a really good learning experience. I look at the guys differently than I did prior to this." She describes how emotions effect relationships and how others respond when the affective climate changes:

"One of our Books@Work team members is quite a bit younger than the rest of us. I'm unfortunately guilty of treating him probably more like a kid. He's a very smart gentleman, but I think we all dismissed [him] to some degree. We've learned to listen to [him] more and respect that a fresh pair of eyes sometimes is a whole lot more than we were giving him credit for. His respect for us has grown, and I think our respect for him has grown quite immensely actually."

Ms. A's enhanced recognition of self and other aligns with Mr. C's vision for the Company as a whole. Mr. C emphasizes the connection between personal history and the learning organization he seeks to create throughout the Company.

"We want a place where everyone can bring their true not-so-perfect self to work. The fact that I grew up as an underprivileged black male really forces me to look at the world a little differently. I continuously examine myself worth and I compensate for this baggage by bringing a different version of myself, a tougher man, smarter man version of myself to the real world."

Participants describe an environment in which everyone can bring a more authentic version of themselves to work. Mr. B, Vice President of Global Sales, initially went to great lengths to avoid Books@Work. He could not fathom how a group discussion of a short story would create value in a schedule that kept him constantly on the road. When he finally participated in the discussion of two stories by Nobel Laureate Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Mr. B, a Central American native, immediately reflected on his own life experience:

"The Marquez [story] was very emotional for me. It allowed me to connect with my roots. In business contexts, I tend to keep very neutral. I don't expose my culture. In [the Books@Work] environment I've opened up more, and that's really caused me to share things within, how I grew up, so it allowed me to share more. It was good."

He expressed the power of Books@Work to hone his self-awareness and his connection to his peers, especially to those whose work is naturally "at odds" with the sales function. For example, reflecting on Haitian author Edwidge Danticat's story "The Bridal Seamstress," he explained that he and his project management colleague were struck by the author's description of plastic on the couch in her living room. "It was great. It happened instantaneously when I [reacted to the story]: 'That's exactly how I grew up with the plastic on my couch, [it was]my grandmother's thing.' [My colleague said] 'That's what I did too!' Immediately, something formed. I don't know what it was, but now we connect."

Once they had established this common reference point, the quality of their connection improved.

"That simple thing of the plastic on the couch. That was a perfect example. We just formed a bond. Now we must go back, to reset ourselves to this commonality, to tackle some problems. We had a challenging situation where we didn't agree on a contracts manager role that she was hiring for. I'm used to project managing it from my commercial side. And it was much easier to figure out when we were laughing. We said very openly, 'I disagree with you.' I don't feel a sense of I'm about to fight somebody. I think that's a perfect example: the plastic on the couch was a common place for us to talk."

Mr. C also reflects on what individuals gain from the stories and the ensuing transformation when participants challenge their assumptions:

"The most meaningful outcome for me is when [one of my team members] called and said, 'I know this is going to sound very, very strange, but I think I have some serious racial bias, because I've never really explored my biases, and this exercise that we're doing has allowed me to explore my biases in a way that I've never done.' That was a powerful and moving experience for me because it allowed him to have some reflection. It allowed him to interrogate what was happening for him, and he thought he would share that and use it as a vehicle for change."

*The conversation forms a safe space for discovery, social connection and adaptation*

Books@Work becomes a unique conversation space that occasions new social connections. Ms. A notes, "I think you see a person... for somebody other than another supervisor, another co-worker, because all of a sudden you're talking feelings, you're talking thoughts." Ms. A has found a deeper and more personal attachment to colleagues, including one she has known since childhood and others who she barely knew.

Ms. A's description of the group's discussions about Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* provides insight into this transition:

"We were talking about them coming out of the war and not being able to step back into life, not being able to fit in and not being able to feel like they belonged. We got talking about how lots of times in life you don't feel like you fit in. One of the guys that works with me doesn't communicate well with others. I said to our little group, 'That's how I think [this colleague] perceives himself. He doesn't know how to communicate always and I don't think he fits in well. So it isn't always just warriors or soldiers coming back.' I've never stopped and thought about that either until we're discussing it. That book made me go, 'Hmm, maybe I should try to help him more.'"

Mr. B is quite explicit: "It's not the book, it is the discussion about the book." The book created the safe space for an unprecedented form of personal discussion that gave his team members the psychological safety they needed to confront the issues that bother them. "We needed to build trust," he concluded. The narrative-based conversation "greases the skids, or accelerates, which makes everything a little bit faster. [We can] enter the space and enable the personalities to come out."

Mr. B eventually brought Books@Work to his own team – a constantly-traveling global sales group. Helen MacDonald's *H is for Hawk* surfaced a tension within the team about whether they needed to work on flights when traveling or if they could take time for themselves. The book gave them permission to explore and resolve the tension. The group focused on the power of "sitting in the window seat," of taking time to think, refresh and recenter. The window seat became a shared metaphor within the team for taking the time to "look at the world" or "take your time."

This easy translation of literary themes to management issues holds powerful implications for Mr. C, whose initial desire was to read business books.

"My desire to use business books has completely waned. These books are probably *more* related to what we do everyday. Because the stuff of work is the stuff of people, the stuff of characters, the stuff of personalities. It's what's happening inside a person, in their mind, what's happening when the individuals get together and are working together on a specific business issue. And when you can step into the shoes of a character which is stepping into the shoes of someone else on your team, you recognize that how they're experiencing the world is very different from how you are experiencing the world. Business books don't help you to do that, don't help you to understand that there's some vulnerability there."

Mr. C. also suggests that the quality of interaction has improved across his team:

"I think the program has strengthened my team by improving the directness and candor on the team. We've been able to create a social environment where authenticity and candor is the norm. We talk about the experiences that individuals have had through the perspectives of the characters, and we use the characters to bring about something that is special amongst the team."

*Participants develop shared language and a collective value system*

That "something special" that Mr. C describes hints at the emergence of a new team identity, a collaborative strength and collective intuition that begins to change the way they see themselves – and function – as a team. Mr. C cites Dave Egger's short story version of *The Circle* as providing a powerful opportunity to examine current mental models, explore the flip side of a well-intended policy and internalize a narrative as shared language for the consideration of business decisions:

"This story is about a young lady that joins a company with a very pronounced culture. She was ... asked to participate in some of the social ac-

tivities taking place in the company. On the surface, that's not too bad. The reality is this young lady got a social score, and her social score impacted her progression in the company. I realize that in our company we sometimes give people an unofficial social score. It's made me far more aware [that] we have to think about how [our employees are] experiencing the Company, and some of these simple things that we think make sense – the dinner after work, the gathering to do a particular thing – that they could in fact be impacting how we view people, and it's creating a social score."

As he and his team began the rollout of their own commercial excellence program, Mr. C has been very mindful of the downsides of some otherwise well-intentioned initiatives.

Mr. C also describes the way his team has used the program to develop a "common belief system." They have moved toward revised priorities that guide the way the executive team engages with each other, with their own teams and throughout the entire organization. Built on "trust, honesty, integrity and symbiotic relationships," this emerging system feeds and supports a more effective learning organization.

"Because the stories are so different and diverse, we bring such different contexts, ideas, experiences, we talk from different angles. When we arrive at a communal understanding, we are developing a common belief system. It helps us to reinforce our commitments, our commitment to be respectful of each other's ideas, thought, experiences, to be truly human. It helps us bring our humanity into the workplace."

This collective ethos means something quite specific to Mr. C, who mused on the "dark side of hierarchy": the isolation of the leader. He asserts that "a collective discussion is better than an individual decision," and that Books@Work becomes a "canvas for practice," a place for team members to build the muscles needed to create a "shared economy," a sense of

collective accountability. When Mr. C was away from the company for a six-week learning sabbatical, his Director of Strategy took the reins and the team worked with him to fully support the Company in his absence. He credits the trust and the camaraderie this team has built in the two years to Books@Work: it's "tilling the soil for the development, flourishing *and* execution of new ideas."

By releasing control of the conversation Mr. C's team has simultaneously built both individual *and* collective skills. The "conscious decision to let the process work" has paid off: "There's a direct correlation between [the program] and the work. Is it a one-to-one? I can't say, but I can definitely say that our business is performing substantially better."

More specifically, Mr. C describes a significant change in how his team makes more productive sense of their work:

"It's focus and speed of execution. A lot of the questioning that we would do before was not exactly critical thinking questioning, wasn't exactly deep inquiry. It was really questioning to try to understand someone's mental model or try to understand if someone had an angle. Now that we've used the platform to make mental models more explicit, we can get right at the issue that may be sensitive, that may be the elephant in the room, that might be the undiscussable."

Mr. B's experience parallels Mr. C's in many ways. Mr. B described noticeable changes in his team: "Books@Work lets us come out of our shells. It shakes up the environment so that we can talk about things." He described a meaningful talent discussion, noticeably different from prior discussions: "The team spoke of their own teams with respect and dignity, truly delving into each person's behaviors while questioning their own roles as leaders." Historically reluctant to discuss performance gaps and fearful that unfilled roles might be permanently closed, many quietly struggled with low-performing teams. But during a recent session, occasioned by a spirit-



ed discussion of Charles Johnson's story, *Menagerie*, one team member asked for advice about three non-performing members of his own team. Mr. B expressed wonder that "one of my guys asked for advice. He wouldn't have done that before."

Finally, Mr. C testified to the emergence of Ms. A's team's new identity, which he believed led to greater productivity and innovation. "I can't make a causal connection, but there is a strong correlation." The team improved not only its personal relationships but its workflow processes, becoming so efficient that one team member could be reallocated to a different manufacturing area. In measurable terms, Mr. C attributed \$3-4 million dollars in cost reduction to these efficiencies. "Is it all Books@Work? We can't say that. But I can say that they were not doing anything else during that time frame."

Mr. C's insights remain rooted in business impact:

"The most pronounced thing that I've gotten from Books@Work is improved perspective seeking and improved perspective taking. That is the key, because it forces you at times to step into and understand the experience of a character within the book. Now when we're working on business topics, I see broader perspective taking and broader perspective seeking, and it's been a welcome surprise."

Mr. C is specific about the broader business impact as well:

"Something about reflecting on a piece of literature provides a safe platform to challenge our mental blocks and examine each other's experiences. We can go down the ladder of influences and deeply talk about what shaped us, what shaped our beliefs, and it gives us an amazing playing field to be human and to bring our whole selves to work.

When you have a platform to share your feelings and to talk about different topics, you can also talk about some of these technical topics with more confidence. The subject matter

experts are no longer the subject matter experts who are not open to new challenges.

Processes and system tools cannot create a one-on-one relationship like what is created in these seminars. Now you can go directly to someone you've interfaced with for help, of course, for a solution."

### Discussion: Theory and Practice in Dialectical Dialogue

The qualitative data describes the way in which participants leverage literary narratives to explore connections to their individual lives and to collective experiences within the organization. The data also reveal theoretical insights about personal and collective learning, sensemaking and organizational culture and the wisdom of life experience in a world that might overly value educational credentials as a marker of ability, intelligence and success.

Our abductive analysis confirms that a revised approach to engaged scholarship allowed us to "try tentatively to relate the data to the whole, upon which new light is shed, and from here . . . return to the part studied, and so on" (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009, p. 92). The dialectics proposed in Figure 1 and the three resulting themes became the vehicle for recognizing and uncovering more complex views of learning and social interaction, which supported stronger individual and collective outcomes in the workplace.

A long line of scholarship places *conversation* and *conversation space* at the core of organizational existence and coherent organizational identity (Mumby & Clair, 1997). Dialogue is a joint meaning-making experiential learning process (Baker, et al., 2002), "a reflective form of conversation that can ... reveal mental models and ...make them available for critical explorations, ...making possible the emergence of new mental models." (Jacobs & Heraclous, 2005) As articulated by Mr. C, the collective exploration of a text invites personal stories, viewpoints and perspectives

that leads to joint meaning making, challenging mental models and the opening of new individual and collective possibilities.

The conversation space also became a neutral safe space for individuals to share their experience, assert their autonomy, express their emotions and make sense of their common and diverse perspectives (Edmondson, 1999). When Mr. B recognized the opportunity the stories gave him to share his own vulnerabilities, he described new roles and relationships with his peers and enhanced confidence within his team. Whether at the executive level or on the front line, the conversation space invites each member of the collective to "bring his or her own legitimate memory, perspective, and imagination in the space as potential resources for learning." (Baker, et al., 2002).

These sharing moments give rise to the high-quality connections that Dutton and Heaphy (2003) describe as the "dynamic living tissue" that fosters positive organizational outcomes. These high-quality connections are not limited to teams of peers within a single organizational level; managing "collaboration involves inter-organizational relationships ...not governed by either hierarchical or market mechanisms" (Hardy, Lawrence & Phillips, 1998: p.78). The "relative autonomy" of participants develops discursive skills, and "authoritarian decision-making" undermines the group effort (Hardy et al., 1998). Mr. C's determination to loosen his control as the leader, to empower others to find their voices and share their perspectives through Books@Work began a journey of preparation for more empowered individuals, more effective teams and ultimately a more successful company, one in which "everyone is at the table."

Adult learning theory and developments in neuroscience offer a compelling way to interpret the changes participants observed in themselves and others. Theoretical insights have evolved to encompass three key domains of learning – cognition, emotion and social interaction (Illeris, 2014; Stewart, Gapenne, & DiPaolo, 2010) –

in dynamic, co-emergent processes that require all three to produce change within a person. Learning theory has consistently pointed to the pressing need for individuals to develop the “adaptive function to meet the contingencies of everyday life . . . [and] the adaptive capacity to make and remake themselves” (Musolf, 2006, p. 281). Participants suggested this adaptive learning when they described how Books@Work prompted them to think and act differently in their jobs and beyond.

In Books@Work each person’s *life experience* is essential as perspectives are shared, unfolded and interpreted within the social context. The safe conversational space for *emotional expression* is essential for the meaning-making elements of conversation theory. Participants described how they *made sense* of themselves and the workplace in new ways within the triple hermeneutic of narratives, personal experience and emotional expression. Zhao and Biesta (2012) asserted that we make sense of *who we are* in dialogue with others. Literature discussions created a participatory sensemaking experience (DeJaegher & DiPaolo, 2007) that became a catalyst for learning and action (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005). Our practice-embedded research allowed us to see that individuals described an emergent *adaptive capacity*, which aligns with the theoretical expectation of more complex approaches to learning.

Perhaps the most surprising insight came when we identified links between participant descriptions of individual adaptive learning and evidence of organizational *absorptive capacity* – an insight that might have remained hidden without our interactive dialogue between scholarship and practice. Mr. C observed how the team’s “improved perspective seeking and perspective taking” occasioned by stepping into a character’s shoes translated to their ability to step into each other’s shoes. Using nearly identical terminology, Bolland and Tenkasi (1995) assert that innovation depends on the ability of “actors with different expertise to better recognize and accept [others’] different ways

of knowing” (p 358). These diverse “ways of knowing,” linked to prior substantive and technical knowledge relationships and experiences, allow individuals to expand those contributions by sharing and listening to each other, in turn driving the *absorptive capacity* – or learning ability – of a group (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). Collective absorptive capacity does not depend on any single individual but on the links across a mosaic of individual capabilities and “ways of knowing” (Nelson & Winter, 1982, cited in Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). The data revealed that the emergent *adaptive capacity* of the individuals who engage in literature discussions of this nature gives rise to emergent *absorptive capacity* of the collective, contributing to an organization capable of learning, absorbing and sharing new ideas.

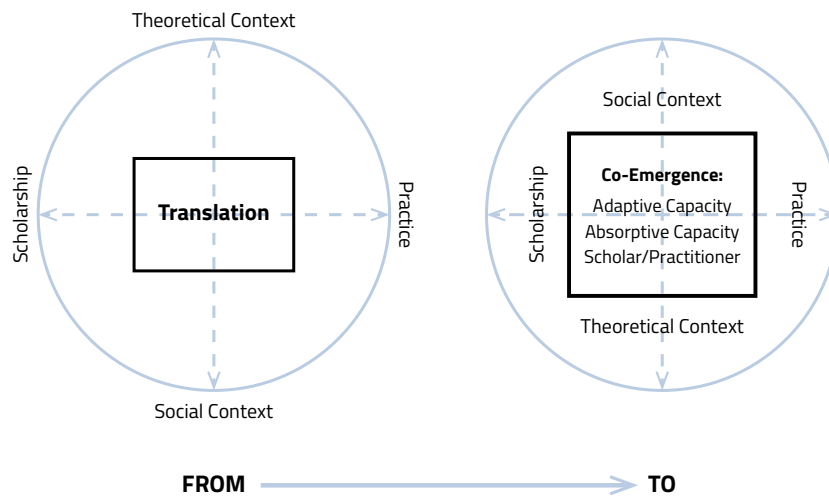
Mr. C’s instincts to empower a more cohesive “learning organization” point to this powerful reformulation of the connection between individual adaptation and absorptive capacity as a continuing area for research and exploration in practice. Absorptive capacity gauges the extent to which companies can leverage internal knowledge to more effectively manage both incremental and radical innovation (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). Originally viewed in the context of R&D, but more recently grounded in formal routines, systems, practices (Zahra & George, 2002) and organizational structures (Van den Bosch, et al., 1999; Lane, et al., 2006), the Books@Work experience suggests a definitional need to further broaden the mechanisms and the people that contribute to an organization’s absorptive capacity. Investing in individuals from the management team to the shop floor, in seemingly random discussions, unlocks their prior experience and embedded knowledge, creating surprising wells of individual capacity and interpersonal connection that strengthen the social fabric and create a more cohesive, productive organization.

Finally, the data points to an important reality, rarely expressed: just as “business books don’t help” colleagues understand the “stuff of people” (Mr. C), structural arrangements, task focus and technology are insufficient to capture the full learning potential of an organization. Organizations are social communities where members build and express identities, bonding, stories and characters. Our findings affirm the intuition that initially drove the creation of Books@Work: engagement with literature in the tradition of the liberal arts allows colleagues at every level to share their human experience and identities, unleashing untapped potential in themselves and the organization. Books@Work is far from the only way to continually nurture the organization’s social fabric of bonding, trust and care for others, but its outcomes underscore the theoretical and practical contribution that this kind of intervention makes: the preservation of humanity against the depersonalization of *business as usual*.

The marriage of theory and practice yielded the *co-emergence* of individual adaptive capacity and collective absorptive capacity. This understanding of Books@Work as a model for a new form of engaged scholarship emphasizes the importance of a continuous vibration between practice and scholarship, concurrently producing theoretical insights and evidence-based practice improvements at the intersection of social and theoretical contexts (Figure 2). In particular, the Books@Work example reveals the practice-building power of evolving theory and the theory-building power of practice captured in Figure 2.

But this marriage also requires a mindset change: scholars traditionally separate “doing” from “studying,” the actor from the researcher. Our work demonstrates that this division is shortsighted: the new scholar-practitioner must *do* and *be* both, concurrently addressing problems of practice in real time and making important contributions to both practice and theory.

Figure 2



### Limitations and Challenges

This reformulation of scholar-practice might pose concerns and challenges for those who would embrace a more thorough integration of theory, program design and research. It will require appropriate practices and standards to ensure the validity and trustworthiness of such socially constructed processes (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). For this approach to gain broad acceptance, the community of scholar-practitioners must be open to new mechanisms for gathering and sharing data, uncovering biases, challenging conclusions and building validity for theoretical and practical advances across contexts.

Donning both scholar and practitioner hats and responding to the needs of current and potential clients, creates substantial opportunity for bias in this work. The self-selecting companies and participants might limit a full view of the successes and failures of the Books@Work approach. Achieving communicative validity (Alheit, 2010) requires ongoing, real-time conversations with organizational leaders and program participants to verify what the authors observed in the data and to test program changes based on study results. To that end, we continue to engage in design, data analysis, and redesign in multiple cycles of feedback from participants. In

addition, the consistent responses from a constantly growing set of informant-participants (more than 500 and counting) neutralizes some of the concern created by evaluating and analyzing our own work.

As company leaders evaluate for themselves the effectiveness of the program, their continued commitment to its implementation lends strength to the argument that the learnings of Books@Work add both pragmatic and practical value. Pragmatic validity (Lincoln & Guba, 2013) answers the question “So what?” because “the final import of the conclusions as to knowledge resides in the changed idea it enforces into action” (Dewey, 1929, cited in Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 4).

### Future Directions and Implications (Practice, Policy and Research)

A clear set of directions emerged from the analysis of the qualitative data and from the resulting theoretical insights both for Books@Work and for the broader field of adult learning.

**Practice:** This scholar/practice research shaped the day-to-day actions of Books@Work in real time. For example, as interview data was collected and analyzed, staff worked with professors and participants to develop targeted strategies that promoted connections between literature

and life experience. The insights gained from this approach support the articulation and promotion of the program’s principles for its own growth, with implications for other workplace learning initiatives. In addition, this approach unveils and gives practical life to valuable theories (e.g., absorptive capacity) rarely translated into practice.

**Policy:** This work demonstrates to organizations and to funders that deeper insights occasioned by rigorous qualitative learnings foster more effective programs, providing more nuanced evidence of impact. It also suggests the untapped power of the full integration of scholarship and practice as a foundational principle to address problems of practice.

**Research:** The findings and methodological insights require deeper inquiry into the cognitive, emotional and social factors of individual and organizational learning. Books@Work seeks to build on the qualitative findings of this study to create a variety of research models that test the generalizability of its findings, particularly related to adaptive learning, high-quality connections and absorptive capacity, issues important to a broad community of learners.

### CONCLUSION

We both were drawn to executive doctoral studies by our discomfort with the separation between scholarship and practice and yet we continue to struggle with the dilemma. A tendency to bifurcate the two remains – on the scholar side, to seek “high-quality” (pure) research that can be used in the service of practice; on the practitioner side, to use theory created in the academy only (and barely) to support predefined program goals. Simply bridging scholarship and practice has failed to produce satisfying results and genuine integration remains elusive.

Concurrently exploring the theoretical design, practical application and research-driven evaluation of Books@Work provided the platform to model a different way. This evolving approach moves beyond engaged scholarship as a “participatory form of research” (Van de Ven, 2007, p. 8) to an embedded form of inquiry and action that relies equally on theory and practice as simultaneous, co-emergent processes.

Only by approaching Books@Work through a scholarly lens were we open to seeing the remarkable linkages between individual adaptive capacity and organizational absorptive capacity; only by delivering a program in practice were we able to explore these phenomena across diverse populations. Most importantly, only by doing both concurrently were we able to reach a rich discovery: the adaptive individual contributes to the absorptive learning capacity of the collective at every level of the organization, which supports the contribution of the individual.

Despite the best efforts of scholars and practitioners, the needs of adult learners both in and outside the workplace remain woefully unmet. As society increasingly demands more effective adult learning, practice needs rigorous scholarly inquiry as much as scholarship needs practical relevance. Herein lies perhaps the most powerful insight for evidence-based management (and for the doctoral programs seeking to develop a community of scholar-practitioners): a single lens to join theory and practice in a seamless partnership between scholars, practitioners, and program participants provides a strong foundation to advance theoretical understanding while solving meaningful problems of practice and improving human outcomes.

## REFERENCES

- Alheit, P. 2010. **Some reflections on the 'obstinacy' of qualitative research.** Fragment shared by the author in personal communication, October, 2013, unpaginated.
- Alvesson, M. & Skoldberg, K. 2009. *Reflexive methodology: New vistas for qualitative research*, (2nd Ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.
- Baker, A.C., Jensen, P.J., & Kolb, D.A. 2002. *Conversational learning: An experiential approach to knowledge creation.* Westport, CT: Quorum Books.
- Boland, R., & Tenkasi, R. 1995. Perspective making and perspective taking in communities of knowing. *Organization Science*, 6(4), 350—372.
- Brinkmann, S. 2014. Doing without data. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 20 (6), 720—725
- Bruner, J. 2004. Life as narrative. *Social Research*, 71 (3), 691—710.
- Charmaz, K. 2014. *Constructing grounded theory*, (2nd edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Cohen, W. & Levinthal, D. 1990. Absorptive capacity: A new perspective on learning and innovation. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 35(1): 128—152.
- The Conference Board, Partnership for 21st Century Skills, Corporate Voices for Working Families and Society for Human Resource Management, 2006. *Are they Really Ready to Work? Employers' Perspectives on the Basic Knowledge and Applied Skills of New Entrants to the 21st Century Workplace*. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED519465>
- Corbin, J. & Strauss, A. 2008. *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- De Jaegher, H. & DiPaolo, E. 2007. Participatory sensemaking: An enactive approach. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 6, 485—507.
- Dutton, J.E. and Heaphy, E.D. 2003. The Power of High-Quality Connections, In, K. Cameron J. Dutton and R. Quinn (Eds) *Positive Organizational Scholarship*. 263—278). San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler)
- Edmondson, A. 1999. Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44: 350—383.
- Hardy, C., Lawrence, T.B., & Phillips, N. 1998. Talk and action: Conversations and narrative in interorganizational collaboration. In D. Grant, T. Keenoy, & C. Osrick (Eds.), *Discourse and organization*: 65—83. London: Sage.
- Illeris, K. 2014. *Transformative learning and identity.* New York, NY: Routledge.
- Jacobs, C., & Heracleous, L. 2005. Answers for questions to come: Reflective dialogue as an enabler of strategic innovation. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 18(4): 338—352.
- Lahart, J. 2010. Even in a Recovery, Some Jobs Won't Return. *The Wall Street Journal*, January 12.
- Lane, P.J. Koka, B.R & Pathak, S. 2006. The Reification of Absorptive Capacity: A Critical Review and Rejuvenation of the Construct. *Academy of Management Review*, 31(4): 833—863.
- Meretoja, H. 2017. On the use and abuse of narrative for life: Toward an ethics of storytelling. In B. Schiff, A.E. McKim, & S. Patron (Eds.), *Life and Narrative: The risks and responsibilities of storying experience*: 75—97). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Mumby, D.K. & Clair, R.P. 1997. Organizational Discourse. In T.A. van Dijk (Ed.), *Discourse as Social Interaction*: 181—205. London: Sage.
- Musolf, G.R. 2001. John Dewey's social psychology and neopragmatism: Theoretical foundations of human agency and social reconstruction. *Social Science Journal*, 38, 277—295.
- Nelson, R.R., & Winter, S. 1982. *An evolutionary theory of economic change.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Nestor, K. R. 2015. *Understanding biographicity: Redesigning and reshaping lives in young adulthood* (Doctoral dissertation, The George Washington University).
- Schiff, B., McKim, A.E., & Patron, S. (Eds.). 2017. *Life and narrative: The risks and responsibilities of storying experience.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Stewart, J., Gapenne, O. & Di Paolo, E.A. (Eds.). 2011. *Enaction: Toward a new paradigm for cognitive science.* 145—164). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Smith, A.K. 2010. *The delicate balance of organizational leadership: Encouraging learning and driving successful innovation.* (Doctoral dissertation, Case Western Reserve University).
- Van den Bosch, F.A., Volberda, H.W. & De Boer, M. 1999. Coevolution of firm absorptive capacity and knowledge environment: Organizational forms and combinative capabilities. *Organization Science*, 10: 557—568.
- Van de Ven, A.H. 2007. *Engaged scholarship: A guide for organizational and social research.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Weick, K.E. 1951. "Theory and practice in the real world." in *The Oxford Handbook of Organization Theory*: 460. Tsoukas et al. (Eds.), *Oxford University Press*, 2003.
- Weick, K.E., Sutcliffe, K.M., & Obstfeld, D. 2005. Organizing and the process of sensemaking. *Organization Science*, 16(4), 409—421.
- Zahra, S.A. & George, G. 2002. Absorptive capacity: A review, reconceptualization and extension. *Academy of Management Review*, 27, 185—203.
- Zhao, K & Biesta, G. 2012. The moral dimension of lifelong learning: Giddens, Taylor, and the 'reflexive project of the self'. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 62(4), 332—350.

## APPENDIX A

<b>Ann's Doctoral Studies/Dissertation</b> <b>Doctor of Management Program</b> <b>Weatherhead School of Management,</b> <b>Case Western Reserve University</b>	<b>Karen's Doctoral Studies/Dissertation</b> <b>Executive Leadership Program</b> <b>Graduate School of Education and Human Development,</b> <b>The George Washington University</b>
<p><b>Theory:</b>  Themes of Doctoral Program: Problem of Practice, Design, Sustainable Systems, Organizations and Management</p> <p>Major Theoretical Influences:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Experiential Learning</li> <li>▪ Conversational Space</li> <li>▪ Absorptive Capacity</li> <li>▪ Ambidexterity: Exploration and Exploitation</li> <li>▪ Double Loop Learning</li> </ul> <p>Research Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Balancing "emergent" and "directed" conversation effectively, helps leaders use conversation to realize strategic innovative outcomes</li> <li>▪ Balanced leadership is critical to achieving organizational learning required for innovation, but innovation requires acquisition <i>and</i> integration of new ideas; Fostering a bottom-up and peer-to-peer sharing environment is critical to fruitful and productive innovation</li> </ul>	<p><b>Theory:</b>  Themes of Doctoral Program: Adult Learning, Change, Culture, Leadership</p> <p>Major Theoretical Influences:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Holistic theories of learning</li> <li>▪ Biographicity - Capacity to shape one's life</li> <li>▪ Complex adaptive systems - individual and collective change</li> <li>▪ Enactive Theory rooted in neuroscience</li> </ul> <p>Research Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Learning, sensemaking and autonomy are processes that support individuals to shape their lives according to their own needs and desires.</li> <li>▪ Recognition, defined as understanding the contribution an individual has to make to his/her world, contributes to biographicity.</li> <li>▪ Emergence of the life trajectory results from complex influences on biography.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Methodology:</b></p> <p>Two-part dissertation based in the "problem of practice":</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Modified Grounded Theory applied to a well-crafted Problem of Practice - semi-structured interviews with 17 leaders in practice</li> <li>▪ Structural Equation Modeling of a research question generated from the results of qualitative inquiry &amp; using an existing database of global companies</li> </ul>	<p><b>Methodology:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Modified Grounded Theory based on theoretical focus on <i>understanding</i> human behavior and processes that support individual and collective change.</li> <li>▪ Biographical Research: using life histories (17 individuals) as the data for understanding reflexive processes of individual &amp; collective change; iterative interpretation processes</li> <li>▪ Abductive Analysis</li> </ul>

## APPENDIX B

### Books@Work Program and Data

Books@Work was piloted in 2009 with a group of food service workers and professors from Hiram College in Northeast Ohio. We formed a 501(c)(3) in June 2011 and began to scale in 2012. As of early 2017, Books@Work had delivered programs to ~3500 participants, with 300 professors teaching about 320 unique texts.

The program typically is offered to 20 individuals, over a three-month time period; the group meets weekly and discusses three different books with three different professors. The program can be tailored to different situations; as a result, we have many variations from the typical three-month weekly cycle, including bi-weekly or monthly meetings with cross-hierarchical groups or natural teams. In both cases, we often work with cross-functional participants.

Books@Work has a full-time program and curriculum director who guides professors (chosen for their proximity to the company, their comfort level teaching in seminar settings, and their interest in serving non-traditional learners) and orients them to a new teaching environment. They represent a wide variety of disciplines in the humanities, sciences, and social sciences. To select books, the Books@Work team works with the professors' expertise and interest, participant interests (as indicated in initial surveys), and company objectives. In the case of company objectives, Books@Work will only address timeless human themes (eg. trust, leadership, conflict, belonging) so as to avoid becoming instrumental.

Books@Work uses only *narrative texts* of diverse types and a wide array of genres: fiction, non-fiction, drama, poetry, and graphic texts. The program does not teach business or self-help books. Through its qualitative research, the organization has developed a strong perspective about the kinds of texts that are likely to be successful in a Books@Work program. These include texts with a strong character, good

forward moving action and a moral or ethical dilemma with which the group might wrestle. For example, in Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, the actions of the protagonist tend to spark a strong reaction (both positive and negative) across groups. Several participants in the groups that have read this book together shared that they entered the discussion with a strong opinion, only to consider and reflect upon the viewpoints of others, and ultimately re-evaluate their own views.

Wherever possible, the Books@Work team conducts one-on-one interviews (15 to 30 minutes) with participants after the program's completion. To date, the program has gathered more than 400 transcribed participant and supervisor interviews and nearly 150 transcribed professor interviews (for a total of well over 500). The interviews data continues to provide a consistent and rich set of themes, some illustrated in this paper. The questions are intentionally open-ended, to permit participants to share experiences the interviewers might not expect to hear, and to open the aperture on understanding the lived experience of Books@Work. Baseline interview questions for participants include (expanded, as appropriate, through probing questions in response to comments made by the participant):

Please tell me a little bit about yourself: what you do, how long you have been with the organization and anything else you'd like to share.

What would you like me to know about your Books@Work experience?

What surprised you?

Please share a moment in the program that really stands out for you or that will stay with you.

Please tell me about the books:

which had the most impact on you?

which led to the best discussions?

Please tell me about the professors and the role they played in the sessions and in your experience.

How does Books@Work differ from other learning experiences you have had - either workplace-based or otherwise?

Did the conversations and interactions in Books@Work change the way you interact in the workplace?

Is Books@Work good for the Company? Why?

Will you participate again if given the opportunity?

Is there anything else you want to tell us about Books@Work and/or your workplace?

Questions asked of professors are also open ended; we ask them to recount the experience, the aspects of the literary narrative that engendered the most conversation, what they felt went well, what they felt did not go well, what surprised them and how they felt the group's dynamic changed over time. We also ask them to reflect on what, if anything, the experience might cause them to reconsider in their traditional classrooms.

Several Books@Work team members and external consultants, each with different disciplinary training, have evaluated all or a portion of the data looking for insights and patterns. This group included the authors whose backgrounds are in organizational learning and adult learning, respectively, the Books@Work program and curriculum director whose background is in Literature and Pedagogy, and an external contractor whose expertise is in anthropology. Later, an external partner who has doctorate in behavioral psychology and a specialty in organizational interactions, reviewed much of the data independently.

These multiple interpretations surfaced thematic patterns in the responses that shed light on the individual and collective impact of Books@Work. The themes

emerged as we compared responses within and across organizations, and identified recurring theoretical categories. We relied on a gradual condensation of data to distill the meaning expressed by participants, initially by bracketing and coding

events, behaviors, emotions, interactions, ideas, and concepts and then using memo writing and diagrams to capture our evolving thinking about the data (Charmaz, 2014). Although new ideas surface with new programs, a core set of themes are

so consistent as to have reached a level of theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2014). Although three themes are explored in depth in this paper, the following table lists an illustrative, but not exhaustive, set of additional thematic patterns:

<b><i>Recurring Themes</i></b> <b>Books@Work results in:</b>	<b><i>Representative</i></b> <b><i>Quotation (s) Illustrating the Recurring Theme</i></b>
Recognition and surprise at the <b>diverse perspectives</b> occasioned by the same literary narrative	<p>"This program opens up your mind to the possibility that there is another way to handle or see things, and that not everybody is the same."</p> <p>"I felt like a lot of the stories we read had to do with assumptions. Assumptions based on appearance. Assumptions based on our own bias, judgments. Having preconceived notions without actually looking at everything. I felt like that was something that stuck with me in my day job, in my social life. Don't be so quick to judge someone or don't be so quick to jump on something."</p> <p>"I do see there are other conversations taking place or we make assumptions about people based on the way they talk or they interact. They might be scary or intimidating or they're mean, and I do see that some of those words ... She's not as scary as I thought she was, she's actually really down to earth, so it's not as difficult to say I need to go talk to her. It's helped build relationships at least in that regard."</p> <p>"You build friendships through it and you understand. There's people that see things a little bit differently, but they open you up to so many other avenues to look at things."</p>
<b>High-quality connections</b> that nurture trust and foster authentic openness and acceptance	<p>"It helps you connect with your co-workers on a different level. When you understand someone, you can work with them more easily."</p> <p>"I was a little apprehensive with my boss, but in [Books@Work], she understood where I was coming from and I understood where she was coming from. When I got to speak, she saw me speaking differently. And when she got to speak, I saw her speaking differently."</p> <p>"Being able to get outside of your role and just be a person, a whole person, and not just a worker ... I get to know you better and then when we go into our work situation, I already know you. There's a higher level of trust because you're a person now and not just a worker bee."</p> <p>"Some of us have gotten closer because we have more insight on them, a more in-depth understanding of who they are as a person and the way they think, the way they view things. Now when you see them at work, it's more a little brush across the shoulder or something, versus before, "Hey how you doing," and keep on going. Definitely I'm thinking it was just relationships, cross functional relationships from department to department, and individuals that I normally don't interact with day to day, it may be months before we interact with one another. It definitely helped as far as building relationships."</p>
Creation of <b>organizational networks</b> to navigate the workplace	<p>"I now have a friend in IT."</p> <p>"In that room there was not a single person from my team. That starts building relationships and connections across teams. I feel like I have contact. I can reach out to him if I have a question in this area or to form [a] partnership with his team."</p> <p>"When we take the time to exchange ideas and feelings outside the work environment, we build a deeper trust inside the work environment."</p>
Opportunities to <b>step back and reflect</b> , permitting a renewed energy when returning to workplace obligations	<p>"...an escape to a different world in the middle of the day... it provides new perspectives. [T]hen you can go back and feel refreshed and renewed."</p> <p>"I went back to work and I felt refreshed. You come back and you [think], 'Oh, I've been stuck on this all day. Now I . . . I got it now. Now I can move on.'"</p>



<p>Willingness to <b>bring more of the self into the workplace</b>; authentic inclusion</p>	<p>"In Books@Work, there's a lot of times we come in and we kind of wear a mask and we put barriers up. We don't want people to know the real us and all of our dislikes. We don't mind people knowing our likes, but we don't want them to know all of our dislikes. In the Books@Work, I felt that in the conversations, there were a lot of times, especially when it was Pygmalion, the father with the daughter and how he didn't really care what happened to her and that hurts me because I have two daughters and I would, I can never be like that and I was able to ... Because of how the discussion was going, share my heart and really how I feel about my ... It still makes me emotional, it's like how much I love my family, and that's one thing I'm never shameful of. I'll tell anyone how much I love my family, but in there, even more came out, stuff that I wouldn't normally share with people. Because of that, I feel that I grew friendships and I feel that people now know a little bit more about me, then people would come to me, maybe ask for advice on something or talking about my DAD being a pastor talking about stuff like that, but now people go to me, ask me if I could pray for their family and stuff. I mean, that's what it's really all about."</p>
<p>Development of <b>new skills</b> and acceptance of new challenges</p>	<p>"I would never have picked these books to read. It was out of my comfort zone. So, it's opening my world in a sense, with reading. Because I usually pick an author and stick to that person. Now I'm recognizing that I need to get out of my comfort zone because you can learn a lot."</p> <p>"I listen better now."</p> <p>"If you speak in this setting and you feel more comfortable giving your opinion, it encourages you to speak up in other settings."</p> <p>"There is definitely a difference between my level of I guess confidence when I first spoke at the first session, but by the third session I felt comfortable and it was in part due to some of that affirmation that I might have felt. But also just being able to listen to and learn more about the people that I was in the room with. So it's you know they weren't ... not that they were strangers to begin with but it was more comfortable after a couple sessions with people. I think that it helps to know that some of the things that I saw and some of the opinions that I had, others thought were interesting or agreed with so it provides a bit of comfort. I think public speaking for me is always going to be something that is scary. But you know I think as you mention it, I think of it now I think that understanding that I have this capability that I can do it, it's just a matter of getting comfortable which is what happened in class."</p>
<p>Understanding of <b>the bigger interpersonal picture</b> of the workplace</p>	<p>"I do find myself with everything I'm working on at this point looking at life and work in a very different fashion. I consider myself to be a servant leader, how can I best serve those around me. I think getting into those conversations with peers is helpful because the department I'm in, we have teams we consider customers and then they have groups they consider customers. I have to think about three levels down. What is that person submitting the ticket really hoping to get out of this. What are they expecting us to fix and making sure that as the ticket comes forward to me, that we've covered all those bases and in the end they're going to get what they wanted. It was a good reminder that there are more people out there than just the 60 people I work with every day."</p>
<p>Openness to <b>seeing something previously unseen in others</b></p>	<p>"[I was in the program with one person who] hadn't had a good history with me. We bumped heads. The conversations we had, just listening, helped me to see, "Okay, so that's why she thinks the way she thinks." It gave me a deep understanding of her thinking process, how she perceives things. You just let your guard down a little bit more towards them."</p>

In addition to interviews, the Books@Work team also surveys participants before the program starts to gauge reading levels, interest, and general demographics. The survey also contains items to understand the respondents' feelings about the organization and more typical employee engagement items. Upon completion of the program, participants are surveyed again, with program satisfaction questions, demographics and the same set of company questions. The surveys are overwhelmingly positive on the program (e.g., found the program worthwhile, would participate again, would recommend to a friend)

but highly mixed on the connections between Books@Work and employee feelings about the organization. Because the relationship between Books@Work and these questions is *not* direct and the responses are influenced by factors beyond the program's reach (by way of example, participants in a company going through a reduction in force may feel threatened no matter how powerful the Books@Work experience may be). As a result, the Books@Work team has recently worked to tailor the survey questions to interpersonal connection scales and to narrow their reach. These changes have been, and

continue to be, informed by the results of the qualitative inquiry. Learning what happens to the participants through their stories and reflections has shed important light on the operation of the program and the contexts within which it operates.

We maintain a commitment to evidence-based practice that will combine formal and informal qualitative and quantitative study to understand the impact of Books@Work and to contribute to scholarship and enhanced practice in adult learning and organizational change.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**Ann Kowal Smith** serves as Founder and Executive Director of Books@Work, a non-profit workplace-based adult learning initiative. She has spent the majority of her career in client service: as a corporate and securities lawyer, a management consultant and knowledge manager at McKinsey & Company and as a principal at Heidrick & Struggles. Deeply committed to education and learning, she earned a Doctor of Management from Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University in 2010. Ann later served as a post-doctoral fellow and as an adjunct professor of Design and Innovation; she remains affiliated with the Doctor of Management Program. Her doctoral research focused on leadership approaches and their impact on organizational learning and performance. Her current work, at once scholarly and practical, focuses on the individual, collective and organizational outcomes of Books@Work. She has presented papers at the Academy of Management Annual Meeting, the First International Meeting of Engaged Management Scholarship, the 11th Annual Transformational Learning Conference, and the Association of Training and Development International Conference and Exposition. In addition to the DM, Ann holds an AB in History of Art from Bryn Mawr College, an MA in History of Art from the University of Michigan, and a J.D. from Case Western Reserve University.



**Karen R. Nestor** has had a long career in K-16 education as a teacher, teacher educator, curriculum designer, researcher and community activist. Committed to practice grounded in scholarship, she entered the Executive Leadership Program in the Graduate School of Education and Human Development at The George Washington University, received her EdD in 2015 and later served as a post-doctoral fellow in lifelong learning. Her research focuses on adult learning using biographical methodologies to explore *learning life histories* and their impact on life trajectories of individuals from marginalized populations. She has presented papers at the European Society for Research in the Education of Adults and at International Transformative Learning conferences. She is co-author of *They Call Us to Justice: Responding to the Call of the Church and Our Students*, a guide for teachers based on extensive research in urban schools. Karen currently is engaged in Books@Work as a curriculum consultant, researcher and trustee.