

A View from the Other Side of the Great Divide:

Personal reflections on practice and academic research

by **Nayda Veeman**

After working in the field of adult education and literacy for over twenty years, I became a full time doctoral student at the University of Saskatchewan almost three years ago. It has been an interesting and challenging leap and I want here to share some personal reflections and observations. Despite serious efforts to bridge the divide between the literacy field and research, such as the Valuing Literacy Initiative, the divide seems even wider to me from this side than it did from the other side.

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I left my job as executive director of the Saskatchewan Literacy Network in 2000 after eleven years in the position. As my former colleagues in the other provincial coalitions will attest, there never seemed to be time to stop and think, let alone to read in depth. Staff in organizations that depend on project funding and that try to secure funding through promotion and partnerships inevitably have ever-expanding work loads and commitments. While I realized the importance of reflecting on my work and on social changes, research in practice remained for me a goal to be achieved. I was never able to consistently block off time for reading or thinking in the face of multiple urgent demands to meet and opportunities to be seized.

Through my work and participation on the board of the Movement for Canadian Literacy, I had established a network of contacts throughout Saskatchewan and Canada. Whatever I had accomplished in the literacy field did not count as a credential on this side of the

divide. Once I became a graduate student, I had to again establish my credibility and build a new network in the academic world. On this side of the divide, credibility depends on publications and conference presentations as opposed to the things I was comfortable with such as op-ed pieces in the

newspaper, talks to service clubs or workshops for adult educators.

Along with the issue of credibility goes the issue of funding, whether in the field or in academia. While still working for the Saskatchewan Literacy Network I tried unsuccessfully for several years to get funding to study the difference between adult literacy levels in Canada and Sweden. I was told that the Valuing Literacy Initiative was my best research funding option, but felt I could not do that successfully as a practitioner because the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council is an academic body. Now

that I have developed a successful application with the help of two university professors, I am certain that I could not have gotten this funding as a practitioner. Only a small fraction of Valuing Literacy grants have been awarded to non-academics. I am convinced that, in the eyes of the review committee, my extensive field experience would not have compensated for my lack of academic research experience.

So at age 58 I began the application process for graduate school. Somewhere in the process I was asked if I had a MAT score. I did not even know what a MAT score was! I needed to take the Miller Analogies Test instead of the more familiar Graduate Record Exam. Needless to say this caused me some anxiety! I did a two week crash course in order to schedule the exam so the results would be available by the university's application deadline. I was



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accepted as a full time student in May 2001 on a student stipend.

In July 2001 I took my first graduate course: a summer literacy institute. This came with a large binder of readings. I had heard of some of the authors, but most I had not. It was a challenge to learn and understand the academic vocabulary and I wondered if I would be able to master this academic literacy. Would I be able to do the research successfully? I long ago had realized that language in the literacy field is about communication, for example "plain language", whereas in the academic context, it is more about hierarchy or vocabulary specific to a given research field. Learning the vocabulary is a prerequisite for acceptance in any context, academic or otherwise.

The courses and support that I have received from the university have broadened my knowledge and understanding of literacy issues.

Through the reading I have done since beginning graduate school, I learned that academics have been asking hard questions and discussing the very issues that were puzzling me. For example, why is there such a mismatch between the 40% of adult Canadians at Levels One and Two in the International Adult Literacy Survey and the numbers of individuals who actually want to get in to upgrading programs? What surprised me most was the volume of research that has gone into this topic that I and, I believe, most of my literacy colleagues never had time to seek out. I was equally unaware of the large body of work related to informal learning. The gap between the literacy field and the research community seems even larger to me from my current academic viewpoint than I thought as a practitioner.

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Over the past eighteen months, I have completed the nine compulsory courses required by my department. Once I passed my comprehensive exam and defended my research proposal in 2002, I was finally able to concentrate on the research I had wanted to do for two years. While I was busy with classes on organizational theory, policy, research methodology and statistics, activity in the literacy field continued. Important meetings happened in Saskatchewan and in Canada that I either did not know about or could not afford time or money to attend.

In conclusion, I feel privileged to have the opportunity to read and think about issues that are important to me. I am confident that the research I am doing is better than it would have been because I am doing it within an academic context. The courses and support that I have received from the university have broadened my knowledge and understanding of literacy issues. There is a lot of academic research and writing going on that could benefit the literacy field, but who in the literacy field has time to read this literature? Is it written in a language that practitioners would understand? How can research knowledge be made accessible to busy practitioners? While I do not know the answers to these questions, I hope that my research and the regional consultations that follow will help in a small way to bridge the gap between the literacy field and academia. ■

Nayda Veeman grew up on a farm in Saskatchewan and attended a one-room school. Since 1980 she has worked in adult education. At the Saskatchewan Literacy Network, Nayda supervised several studies of literacy issues and was instrumental in establishing family literacy in the province. She served as President of MCL from 1997 to 1999.

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