Researching ourselves: Are there some things that practitioners should not research?

by Tracey Mollins

■ I have participated in a few practice-based research projects over the years and, despite feeling anxious, frustrated and overwhelmed at times, I have been energized by what I have learned and proud of what we have contributed to the field. My own experiences of enhanced understanding of my work and the work of my colleagues led me to embrace practitioner research as an effective investigative tool and one of the best ways to develop one's own knowledge and understanding of one's work.

Last year I worked as the Ontario field reviewer for *Connecting the Dots: Improving Accountability in the Adult Literacy Field.* I spoke to literacy program workers; people who work at the literacy coalitions, networks and resource development organizations; and people who work for governments and other organizations that fund literacy programming. I asked them questions about how accountability frameworks impact on the field, literacy workers, programs, learning and learners.

Accountability to whom?

This research project made me wonder if all areas of study are appropriate for practitioner research. Sometimes practitioners try to speak to policy through research, but indirectly. We hope that if we present our reality in a compelling way, backed up with data, policy-makers will reflect that reality in the policy they make. This project aimed to speak directly to policy by showing how certain policies impact upon the work that happens in literacy programs. In this project we were not just investigating our own practice, but looking at the practices of others and thinking critically about them. In many cases, we were asking people to think critically about policies and practices implemented by the very people who make decisions or recommendations about whether or not their program, project, or department is to be funded.

In talking to literacy workers and government workers, I heard how people feel they have been granted with a trust and how they feel responsible to those who participate in adult literacy programs as well as to those who pay for them. I heard about accountability that is internally imposed, implemented from the heart and driven by a commitment to provide equitable access and meaningful, humane opportunities for a diverse range of people. I heard about accountability that is externally imposed, implemented from the top down, and driven by a commitment to prove value for money.

I heard about the research, reflection, planning and experimentation that goes into trying to balance competing accountabilities. And, heartbreakingly, I heard the frustration and despair that comes when, despite awe-inspiring efforts, workers feel that they are compromising their values or are unable to

What Do You Think?

meet their commitments to the people and projects they feel are most important.

> I am, unexpectedly, feeling sad. I was explaining the project the other day and I had to stop because my eyes were welling up and I felt as though I was going to burst into tears. I expected frustration. I expected anger. I did not expect tears. …I think that I am sad about how much this policy stuff hurts people. Nobody says, "This hurts me," but in every practitioner interview, there is at least one moment where a frustration is expressed in a way that echoes across streams, regions, and fields and, as a practitioner, I feel its weight.
>
> *from a post to an online discussion*
> *with the other field reviewers*

ADVENTUROUS.   ADVENTUROUS.*

*CANADIAN MAGAZINES MAKE YOUR INTERESTS MORE INTERESTING. From Travel to the Arts, all written from a refreshingly Canadian viewpoint you won't find anywhere else. Just look for the Genuine Canadian Magazine icon at your favourite newsstand, or visit magazinescanada.ca to find what interests you.

GENUINE CANADIAN MAGAZINE

A little ironically, the question of to whom am I accountable as a researcher arose early in the process:

> My dilemma has arisen because of the accountabilities I feel and that they are competing a little. I feel accountable to the project, the field reviewers group, the literacy field, my community and my responsibilities to ensure equity—not necessarily in that order :-) And the ways I feel accountable to and for each of those things feels different.
>
> *from a post to an online discussion*
> *with the other field reviewers*

I love literacy work. I love the people who do this work. Like all literacy workers, I love the people to come to programs to learn—we love them for what they do and for the commitment they make. And I want the best for the work, the workers and the learners.

As practitioner-researchers where does research start? Well one place it starts is with our own practice. We use our understanding of our own work and the contexts for that work to make sense of our findings. This is how a practitioner gets an insight nobody else does. Practitioner-researchers, rather than try for something that can be described as neutral and bias free, try to make sure all perspectives are included. And one of those perspectives is his or her own. Part of doing practitioner research is documenting our thoughts, emotions, and reactions as we experience them because that also becomes data.

In my previous experiences with practitioner research, I have never felt that there were sides to be taken. In a project that looks at accountability frameworks, we are treading upon contested ground. When people are talking about accountability, they know there are sides to be taken and that it is difficult to stay neutral. Some speak carefully and include a range of perspectives. Some start cautiously and then throw caution to the wind and let me know exactly what they think. Some speak for a wider constituency and report on what they have heard from others. But in every interview, the fact that there are competing views and ideas is acknowledged.

How can I use my experiences and knowledge, what I know about the 'sides' and the ways that different views are expressed by different people, to make meaning out of all the different things I am hearing?

It feels as if there are so many stories I can tell with the data. In some projects, looking for the story was like playing with a snow globe. I shook it this way and then I shook it that way. Each time, the snow rested differently over the tiny landscape. Something different was covered and something different was revealed. Eventually I learned what was under each snow bank and I could tell a story. I checked back with the original storytellers and they said, "Yes. That is the story." In this project, I constantly felt as though I was looking at one of those mock hologram (lenticular?) postcards where the picture changes as you tilt it back and forth. I can include this and discard that and the picture is a rose garden in full bloom. I can include that and discard this and the picture is a rose garden in winter. Or not a rose garden at all.

In this project, as I read over pages of stories about who feels accountable to whom and how, I struggled to find a way to include the multitude of perspectives and all the knowledge, understanding and wisdom I found there. A friend with whom I discussed my data dilemmas sent me this quote:

> The critical task...is to get rid of most of the data you accumulate. That requires constant winnowing, including decisions about data not worth entering in the first place... The trick is to discover essences with sufficient context, yet not become mired trying to include everything that might possibly be described (Walcott p. 44).

There's the rub. Of course, I cannot possibly describe everything that might possibly be described, but by what criteria do I, a literacy worker who feels a literacy worker's accountability to the field, to learners, to literacy program workers and to funders, discard data?

What are our limits?

Should practitioners cross the contested ground in their own field to collect data? Should practitioners describe the very conflicts and discord they work to resolve in their day jobs if they experience anxiety

We used our understanding of our own work and the contexts for that work to make sense of our findings. This is how a practitioner gets an insight nobody else does.

and dissonance with every interview? And, if practitioners cannot tell this story, who should?

I think that, as challenging as it was, the strength of our research lay in the fact that the researchers are practitioners—practitioners do get an insight nobody else does. It is our lived understanding of the sides and the impacts that makes our insights so very important, and I think that it is essential that we add these insights to the story of how Canadian accountability frameworks change the ways in which Canadian literacy work happens.

One question many literacy workers asked me during the interviews was, "Are other people saying similar things? Are other people experiencing this in a similar way to me?" My answer was, "I hear very similar things from all the literacy workers I interview and I read similar things in the interviews from the other regions." Those exchanges and the frequency of them make me ask, "Why don't we know this? Why are we not talking to each other about this?" Perhaps all the stories will never be told in one place but each person who participated in the project, and each person who talks to the researchers or reads the report, carries full stories with them wherever they go. I hope we keep talking to each other and that a day will come when we will not have to ask what other people are saying. I see that some of the places and spaces for talking to each other are becoming smaller and fewer. I worry that if we do not seek each other out in determined and creative ways, such a day may not come soon. Anyone who knows me knows I have great faith in the power of technologies to overcome distance, cost and time and an even greater faith in the capacity and commitment of literacy workers to be rule-bending innovators whose passion for making things better can turn mountains into rose gardens. ∎

TRACEY MOLLINS is the publisher of *Literacies*. She has worked as an online facilitator at AlphaRoute; a workshop facilitator at the Canadian Centre for Language and Cultural Studies; a podcast developer for the Festival of Literacies; and a researcher for *The Learning Circles Project* and *Connecting the Dots*.

SOURCES:

Walcott, Harry (2001). *Writing up qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.