

Reflections on Research in Practice Gatherings

by **Sally Crawford**



Research in Practice in Adult Literacy

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“Your Jenny Horsman is speaking at a literacy conference in Edmonton. You should go.”

My Jenny Horsman? Me go to a literacy conference? It was this off-hand comment that launched me on the road to connecting with other folk around the world concerned with literacy practices, reflection and research.

Months earlier I had come across an article by Jenny on the NALD site decrying “but I’m not a therapist!” The words immediately resonated with me. I facilitate an intergenerational literacy program in the community centre of a government funded housing neighbourhood in Fredericton, NB. I e-mailed Jenny my comments and she graciously replied. Here was a chance to speak with her further and to meet others in the field. But, and a big ‘but’ it was, what did I know about research in practice? Screwing my courage “to the sticking place” I applied and, lo and behold, I was not only accepted, but received some funds to attend! Still thinking I was venturing forth under false pretences I nevertheless went blithely off to Edmonton to participate in Bearing Blossoms...Sowing Seeds. A Gathering about Literacy Research in Practice, 2001.

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I did present a small piece in a workshop about my “living contradiction” – seeing the value of literacy as a tool but not knowing how to communicate that value to Learners and Funders. Mary Norton and Sharon Skage were most helpful with my queries in this area. Jane Mace’s workshop began to demystify some of the questions I had concerning what constituted research. “Writing up or writing down?” and “being a creative writer” are phrases that stick with me from her session. I appreciated the Kiva, that circle meeting place where all voices were heard. I came away with confirmation that our work has to have a holistic approach. I met a host of others – academics, funders, practitioners – all as impassioned about literacy as me. I was astounded at

spending four days with people who would talk as long, as fast and as much as I did. I came home recharged with a wealth of information as well as new authors to investigate, new ideas to ponder, new approaches to try, new friends to enjoy.

The next year, to my amazement, there was another gathering, Portraits of Literacy, being planned – in Vancouver! I had been involved in a small way with an action research project with Dr. Pam Whitty and Dr. Pam Nason at The University of New Brunswick. Pam Whitty suggested that we attend and present a paper about the work. She, Cheryl Brown and I (both Cheryl and I work with The Saint John Learning Exchange) facilitated an inquiry group about developing partnerships and policy to sustain intergenerational and family literacy programs. The paper, to my delight, was later published in *English Quarterly*. In Vancouver I had the opportunity to renew friendships and forge new ones. I listened, I learned, I peeled back more layers of literacy practice. I took delight in “welcoming the wild” and the “not literacy” pedagogy as Elsa Auerbach phrased the work. I began to feel that perhaps I did have something to contribute.

When the announcement appeared that there would be yet a third gathering, I didn’t hesitate a minute. I applied (love those Aeroplan points) to go to Newfoundland. This time I would volunteer to be a rapporteur (whatever that meant.). I felt that because I expect learners in the programs I facilitate to stretch and to venture outside their comfort zone, I must as well. Being a rapporteur would compel me to grow. Besides, I wanted to put something back – I had gained so much from attending the two previous Gatherings. So this time, off to the Rock I went for Research in Practice in Adult Literacy. Participating in Marina Niks’ session on Getting Started in Research in Practice gave me the confidence to realize that I was doing/could do research. We focused on what is research? who does it? and how? I found the whole tone of this third gathering very practical and the sessions that I attended very applicable.

The challenge of being a rapporteur forced me to delve deeper for understanding, to listen very attentively and to articulate points most carefully so that others could see what I saw. I was constantly surprised at the energy, enthusiasm and creativity of the people attending. I found myself continuously jotting down ideas, things to try and phrases I found meaningful.

I was asked to say a few words at the closing. Great Scot – since Edmonton, I had gone from feeling like an interloper to helping facilitate an inquiry group to being a rapporteur to speaking. Wow. My journey to that point was not unlike learners in literacy programs who travel from a place of hesitantly eager to belong to one of realizing and raising their voices. I went home more determined than ever to do research in practice.

I am not so naïve as to be unaware of the undercurrents, the politics and the tensions occurring in the field. We all seem to soldier on, underfunded and undervalued. No one seems to have enough time to do everything. Our tasks range from making the muffins for the program to writing up proposals and lobbying policy-makers and everything in between. All this and do the research as well?! The task is HUGE. But what unites us all and must encourage us all – learner, researcher, funder, practitioner – is the passionate belief that what we do counts. We all are challenging injustice and helping people get on with following their dreams.

Anything that one person can do alone is not worth doing when you're dealing with social problems. If a problem is that small, then the goal is too limited...If a goal isn't something very difficult, all that people will learn to do is tackle little problems. (Horton) ■

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SOURCES:

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