

The Summer of Hope

by **Linda Dawn Pettigrew**

This summer I participated in the three new adult literacy courses offered as part of the Festival of Literacies at the Ontario Institute Studies in Education, University of Toronto.

This experience was about many things: building community, inclusive and supportive academic learning, and the persistence and resilience to keep moving forward. As a result, I am now more aware of how social practice theory and research in practice can work together to bridge gaps that impede learners and teachers alike. Moreover, I found a community in which I may continue to improve my own literacy practices.

To me, literacy means the ability to participate more meaningfully in your own life and more equitably in society. I wrote that personal mantra at the start of my literacy work five years ago when I knew what I meant, but I didn't know how to explain it, or how to connect it to what I was reading and doing. I am not an academic, even though I read widely and keep up with professional development. Before taking the courses I was neither a critical reader nor did I know as much as I would've liked about standard skill-based literacy practices. At times I even had trouble making sense of some of them.

Now I understand that these practices were not meaningful to me because they fail to address the whole of a person's life, including social issues such as poverty and violence which underlie, stigmatize and affect adult learning. I think literacy learners are treated as "inferior" people under prescriptive functionalist models that work against them with their emphasis on a "lack" of this or that.

All the reading and/or writing skills in the world will not alone remedy the social issues learners face, and it was extremely helpful to have an opportunity to formally discuss these ideas. I agree with Jean Cannon Unda who views current literacy education as disempowering because, in her words, it does not support people as "complete human beings, with lives beyond their workplaces" (Undan, p.15).

Viewing literacy as a discrete set of skills is a fundamental problem; it treats people as objects. Working from this model, learners are prescribed

for rather than negotiated with when it comes to know-how. In my opinion, adult learners should always have a strong say in defining what they want to learn but too often learners' perceived needs are instead determined by government agendas or employers.

This summer I began to learn how to put these and other related ideas into words. In each course we engaged in critical reading of relevant materials and in thoughtful discussions. As a result, the program was cohesive, challenging and supportive.

Contemporary Issues: Social Practice Approaches to Workplace Literacy, taught by Nancy Jackson, talked about how the international move toward a broader, more social practice approach applies to workplace literacy education. The pervasive presence of text – both paper and computer – in life today means that being able to use those tools that are necessary to your work is crucial. It's not only older workers like me who are continually challenged to keep up with changing demands.

Participants comprised a dozen or more graduate students with a focus on ESL, workplace education and training, and health, and a couple of other community-based literacy practitioners like myself. Connecting the academics with the practitioners afforded an uncommon learning experience from which we all benefited. Some continue to stay connected, sharing and supporting practice.

Simultaneously, I was taking Mary Norton's online course, An Introduction to Research in Practice in Adult Literacy. Even with its rigorous workload and the challenges posed by a distance-learning format, this course captivated me. It improved my practice, because it built knowledge collaboratively. We mulled over each others' written responses and in my case at least, this produced more considered work than face-to-face discussions would have done.

I loved "hearing" other participants' perspectives about how the articles related to practice, finding out about other research in practice communities, and learning how to outline projects, although I haven't yet had a chance to do so. And all of this meaningful interaction on the internet! I would

never have believed it possible to learn so much in this way. I want to know more about how to research the identity issues we touched on, such as the connection between resilience and the power of story. It was fascinating to learn who is doing what in the dynamic field of research and practice, how they do it, and why. I now know how to access a plethora of handy resources. A favourite resource is *A Traveler's Guide to Literacy Research in Practice*. I like its straightforward appendices of approaches about observation, interviews and analyses. I also appreciate the way this text shows how the qualitative analysis process can foreground learner participants at every stage of data collection, and how descriptive writing can bring the researcher's engagement with her work to life.

Mary Hamilton's course, *An Introduction to Social Practice Theories in Adult Literacy* was a perfect ending to my 'summer of hope'. The concept of literacy as a social practice interests me so much because it is grounded in the everyday world of adult learners. This gave me more concrete practitioner know-how. Since institutions increasingly dominate our lives with written text, literacy practitioners need to understand systemic power dynamics in order to help learners cope with them.

Since the sixties, I have held the axiom that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. This summer served as reinforcement. Each course enhanced the whole of my learning experience, and every aspect of the courses enhanced the rest. For example, guest presenters Sue Folinsbee, Marina Niks and Bonnie Soroke complemented course studies, and classmate presentations in Mary Hamilton's course are unforgettable. It was also exciting to learn that Canadian practitioners can be

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SOURCES:

- Belfiore, Mary Ellen, Tracy Defoe, Sue Folinsbee, Judy Hunter, Nancy Jackson. (2003). *Reading Work: Literacies in the New Workplace*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Connon Unda, Jean (2001) "Reading The World: Learning in Solidarity". *Our Times* August/September 2001, 14-16.
- Crowther, Jim, Mary Hamilton, and Lyn Tett, eds. (2001). *Powerful Literacies*. Leicester: NIACE.
- Norton, Mary. (2003) *A Traveler's Guide to Literacy Research in Practice*. Course materials.

supported through international networks such as the UK's RaPAL.

Now, I am better at critical reading and more aware in my writing. I learned that who we are influences how we think and thus, how we do research. I am optimistic about the relevance of this summer's work; that my deeper awareness of these issues will positively impact learners. I believe I will be more able to facilitate what learners choose to learn, assist them to voice their opinions about the social concerns impacting their lives, and help them realize their own hopes through action. ■

For information about future courses offered by OISE, visit their web site: www.literaciesOISE.ca

Coming Events

The 2004 RaPAL conference will be held at Lancaster University, UK, on July 9th and 10th.

The theme of the conference is 20 Years of Research and Practice in Adult Literacy: Looking Back, Looking Forward. For more information, check their website www.lancs.ac.uk/users/edres/index.htm or send an e-mail to kathryn.james@lancaster.ac.uk.

Next summer's institute at The Centre for Literacy will focus on Adult Literacy and Basic Education: The Impact of Policy on Practice.

This international gathering will be held in Montreal at the end of June, 2004. For more information visit www.nald.ca/litcent.htm.

Canadian researchers in practice have had three opportunities to come together.

The first gathering was held in Edmonton in 2001, the second in Vancouver in 2002, and people met this past June at the Research in Practice Institute in St. John's. Each event has been a rich opportunity to explore research in practice in greater depth. So far, we have not heard where next year's event might be, or who is organizing it. We'll keep you posted! ■