

From Research to Practice: an interactive approach

by **Katrina Grieve**

When I worked in a community-based literacy program in Toronto, I often shelved project reports or kept them in a huge to-read pile. I was all too often caught up in the day-to-day concerns of running the program, struggling to keep up with the paperwork, and dreaming of a day when we could have the time and mental space to do the work we really wanted to do.

A few years ago, I stepped into the role of researcher and project consultant. I conducted research for the Ontario Literacy Coalition on self-management and self-direction, which are also called non-academic outcomes. The research report, *Supporting Learning, Supporting Change*, brought together broader research on a social view of learning with practitioners' experiences of how adults in literacy programs make progress and begin to move towards change.

Once the report was written we wondered, "How can we make sure it doesn't just sit on another shelf?" The Ontario Literacy Coalition printed a shorter version of the report and made it available on its web site (www.on.literacy.ca). However, we felt this was not enough.

We decided to offer workshops to help practitioners understand the research findings, consider how the findings relate to their own programs, and explore possible approaches. We knew that there was not a single best practice. Rather, there are many angles from which to approach self-management and self-direction.

Some programs prefer to use a process-oriented approach, building from a life-skills model of problem solving. Others have found arts-based approaches to be particularly effective in helping learners open up to learning. Many programs have seen the value of hands-on learning opportunities, such as organizing a community event, volunteering, or redecorating the literacy program. The workshops place these examples within a broader framework, stressing the importance of context, meaning and relationships. They encourage program staff to use their imagination and experience to create activities and approaches that help learners build self-awareness and engage them in an ongoing process of action and reflection.

In many cases, workshop participants find that

they have many examples of effective activities and approaches from their own programs. The workshops affirm their experience, instincts and knowledge. They help us state more clearly, "You can't teach literacy in isolation, you have to work with the whole person."

One of the areas we address in the workshops is the difficult terrain of assessment. How do you assess an area that is so personal? Are we in a position to assess learners' level of self-awareness, interpersonal skills or self-direction? Are we placing even more labels on learners in this way? How do you know if your program's approach is working? We discuss these issues within the context of the research findings, examining the dangers of creating further lists of skills that take us away from a more complex understanding of learning based on context, meaning and relationships. The workshop presents a variety of ways to document progress both from the learners' and practitioners' perspectives.

While assessment is an important area to consider, we have to be careful that it does not become an end in itself, limiting the scope of our imagination. As many practitioners report, it is easy to see when someone has made significant progress in this area—they participate more in activities, they interact better with others, their faces light up and they report changes in their daily lives. The challenge is how to support those who see learning as something locked away from them. For now, our focus is on how to support learners to become more self-aware, gain confidence in their abilities and take steps towards change.

At the conclusion of this project, the Ontario Literacy Coalition will publish a guide to support programs through the ongoing process of planning and improving their own approaches to building self-awareness and self-direction.

The dialogue created through these workshops, both among practitioners and between research and practice, has been exciting. I hope that there will be more opportunities for practitioners to come together to interact and engage with relevant research. ■

For more information on this project, contact Patricia Brady: patricia@on.literacy.ca