Literacies, spring 2004, #3, pages 20 to 22 - available at www.literacyjournal.ca

Collaborating to do Research

by **Susan Lefebvre** and **Nadine Sookermany**

In March 2003, three community-based literacy programs submitted a proposal to the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities to answer the question, how do learners in our programs perceive progress? We were not successful in securing funding. However, as students in a course at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto (OISE/UT) called An Introduction to Research in Practice in Adult Literacy, we had the opportunity to pilot the proposed project on a smaller scale. We chose to carry out this research with learners and staff at one of our workplaces, Parkdale Project Read (PPR).

We had two objectives for this project. One was to learn about collaboration: to practise, document and reflect on collaborative processes. The second was to try out a focus group methodology. We wanted to evaluate how well a particular set of open-ended questions and prompts encouraged learners to articulate how they perceived their progress. We used questions and prompts based on two sources: the OISE/UT Research Circle and the practitioner-research report, *Naming the Magic* (Battell).

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In this article, we reflect on the key issues and learnings about the collaborative processes embedded in our project. First we will describe our process, then share our reflections about the two collaborative partnerships that were key to this project: the one between ourselves, and the second between PPR staff and ourselves.

Our Process

We began by meeting to plan and prepare for the project. Next we met with PPR staff to introduce the project and seek their support. They were enthusiastic and together we reviewed PPR staff roles, focus group methods and ethical issues.

The two of us then met to reflect on the meeting, write up minutes and revise our methods based on staff feedback. We reviewed PPR's ethics policy and studied relevant literature while PPR staff tested questions and prompts with individual learners.

At our second meeting with staff, we reviewed how they felt about the questions and prompts and worked to establish consensus about the focus group. Later, we held the focus group activity at PPR. One of us facilitated while the other made notes and observed responses.

Once we had met to discuss and analyze our data, we worked from our homes to write the report, keeping in touch by phone and e-mail.

Our Partnership

Collaborating effectively and building the partnership between us started right away. We chose a flexible management style, sharing leadership and ownership through consensus-based decision-making. We shared or shouldered responsibilities separately depending on the task, our availability and our knowledge or experience. For example, Nadine set up the staff meetings and facilitated the focus group while Susan took minutes and drafted a clear-language consent form and feedback forms for staff. Although sharing tasks reduced our individual workloads, achieving and maintaining alignment and agreement through to the end of the project significantly increased the actual work involved.

Communication

An important issue was our need to collaborate and execute tasks efficiently. We only had four weeks to complete the project. Work, volunteer and home commitments, not to mention schedule differences, left little room for the face-to-face communication we preferred. We knew that responsive and frequent communication was vital. Had we not chosen to communicate frequently via phone calls and especially e-mail, the project would have failed. In fact, these communication tools not only allowed us to work well in spite of our tough time constraints, but e-mail files became a rich data source we later mined in the analysis phase of our project. One regret we did have was not keeping a phone log or journal to document our numerous conversations. In these talks we worried over issues, developed new ideas and

solved problems. Were we to study a collaborative process again, we would consider documenting all forms of communication.

Different perspectives

Collaboration also figured prominently in the ethics of obtaining informed consent. During our initial planning meeting with PPR staff, we agreed on what constituted informed and documented consent, and on the methods we would use to obtain this consent. It seemed very straightforward at first glance. We did not, however, discuss the situation in which one might question a person's ability to give informed consent.

Later, in the data analysis phase, we found we did not have identical perspectives and interpretations about what constitutes consent in a typical adult-learning environment. In particular, we discussed the case of participants who might be vulnerable for reasons such as developmental disabilities or psychological issues. The issue of informed consent is challenging with vulnerable populations. Do they understand what they are agreeing to? Do they understand the implications of consent? In these special cases, how does the researcher judge if informed consent has truly been given?

We had numerous conversations about using participants' real names. We found that we had a difference in opinion based on our individual perceptions, insights, beliefs and assumptions about people. Had we not collaborated, our difference of opinion might not have surfaced. Our decision and ability to collaborate in addressing this issue had wonderful benefits. We discussed these ethical issues numerous times, and reached out to numerous expert resources, including medical personnel with relevant research experience and two other practitioner researchers in adult literacy. We developed insights into the personal beliefs and assumptions underpinning these ethical issues, none of which would have been explored had we worked on our own.

Writing together

Our most challenging collaborative task was writing the report. Each of us contributed myriad ideas that had to be organized into a cohesive document. Questions that arose during the writing process had to be recorded and followed up later. For example, Nadine works very late in the evening

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and Susan works at different hours of the day, so it was not always feasible to pick up the phone to ask each other a question. We developed a good technique to facilitate revising and editing: we used the left-hand margin in our draft reports to make revision and editing suggestions. Text was highlighted with colour to aid in making revisions. All this, again facilitated via frequent e-mail communication, made it possible to write the report collaboratively.

The use of voice in the report was grammatically challenging. Initially we each wrote our sections in the first person; later we changed the "I" to "we" except in cases where using "we" provided clarity or added needed information. All reflection comments used we, given that they represented joint discussion and agreement. This approach was consistent with our overall collaborative intent.

Our partnership with PPR

The collaborative partnership we achieved with the PPR staff was wonderful. They were enthusiastic, passionate about helping their learners and became fully engaged in the project. PPR was viewed and treated as a project partner. Their input greatly influenced the project design. Discussions with the staff allowed us to see variables that we might not have noticed if we were working on our own.

Staff insights

Just one example of the staff contribution to the data collection process was their insight into the need to include cultural background as an identifier for the focus group participants. One staff recalled that, when she started working at a particular literacy program, she was a bit shocked at the number of Caribbean learners in the program. She had to ask herself why. One of her colleagues had a theory that education is held in such high esteem in this culture that if you do not have it, you go and get it.

At PPR, nearly 60 per cent of the active learners are from the Caribbean (2002/2003 statistics). We wondered whether cultural values determine or influence how these learners define progress. Is achieving academic goals an important descriptor or indicator of progress specifically for Caribbean learners? As a result, we included cultural background as a data collection item.

In retrospect, several areas of the PPR collaboration merited improvement. A third meeting with the staff to jointly review focus group results would have provided significant benefit. Improved scheduling and distraction-free meeting environments would have been helpful.

What Makes Collaborative Research Different?

Overall, the most rewarding part of our project was our reflection on the collaboration processes. As novice practitioner-researchers, we were pleased at our ability to deeply explore issues like confidentiality, an unplanned learning inside the larger focus group initiative.

We realized that collaborative research is different from individual research. Effective collaboration requires that you dedicate planning, time and energy to achieving and maintaining alignment between the partners. Our alignment process spanned all phases of the project and was influenced by our individual management and work styles. Although collaborative skills are complex, they can be learned and are best learnt by doing.

We believe collaboration can also help lower certain barriers to research in practice, including the high demands on practitioners' time, the isolation of some literacy workers, the prevalence of part-time practitioners and reduced literacy funding.

As experienced literacy-education practitioners, we place high value on collaboration. This project demonstrated that productive partnerships and cross-fertilization between literacy organizations, practitioners, academic workers and field workers generate excellent opportunities to improve practice, to test and enhance learning models, and to gain a better collective understanding of issues that impact literacy. ■

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SOURCE:

Battell, Evelyn (2001). *Naming the Magic: Non-academic outcomes in basic literacy*. Victoria: Province of British Columbia, Ministry of Advanced Education.