

# A New Focus

by **Jane Boulton**

## Seeing learners through different lenses

**One day someone phoned me to say that an Adult Education professor from the University of Ottawa was looking for field researchers to do ethnographic research on informal learning and literacy practices.** I joined Maurice Taylor's research

team mainly out of curiosity.

As an insanely busy, part-time literacy program coordinator, I long to have the time to burrow into a research question, explore new ideas and wander down new trails of discovery. Not having a project of my own at the time, I was intrigued by the idea of informal learning practices. My few previous brushes with literacy field research had been rewarding, not so much for the

content but for the transformational change that resulted. I hoped this project would also open some windows for me, and it did not disappoint.

Unlike many practitioners, I came to the field of literacy through the back door. I am not a trained teacher, though I am a trainer (albeit of sniffer dogs for Agriculture Canada). My point is that I have spent nine years learning from resources and peers about how to work with adults and families with literacy challenges. One of my greatest dilemmas was how to conduct an intake assessment that would tell me more than the reading, writing and numeracy levels of the student. I have little snippets on learning styles, and indicators of learning disabilities, but I know that I still come up with a very flat picture of my student. This is a critical dilemma because all my tutors are volunteers, and they have varying skill levels. I really long to be able to offer them a more complete picture of the student they are matched with, and to be able to design a learning plan that has a good chance of being successful. Perhaps even more critical is the fact that I have often missed vital clues about a student, which later surfaced as barriers that could have been foreseen if I had known what to look for.

As one of five field researchers, I observed and interviewed two previous students, both of whom had left the program without achieving their goals.

Luckily, they proved to be two really opposite examples. I could have fallen into the trap of generalizing had they not been so different. The person I had thought was an unmotivated learner, I discovered to be a strong independent learner who

pursues knowledge actively in his life. The person I thought was the eager learner proved to be the one who has no interest in lifelong learning, and has an attitude of "Why learn something when you can find someone who knows what you need, who can do the work for you?" The sad



JANE BOULTON

reflection of these discoveries is that my 'in-office interview style assessment' had failed to show me the heart of these two learners. I had simply not had a way to use their daily lives to give me a clearer picture of them as learners.

This project taught me how to investigate the everyday learning experiences of learners, and to draw out not only factual data but also the student's attitude about learning. It was incredible to see what they had been unable to articulate. The man I had thought was an 'unmotivated learner' kept quitting our program. Although we had talked long and often about what was wrong, all he had said was that he didn't like tests. I had made sure that his tutors never used tests, but still he said he found working with tutors too stressful. However, during the research I observed him in a group workshop. The speaker used only her hands and voice, but he was completely distracted by the evaluation sheets that had been placed on each chair. He barely took in the talk, and spent the entire time asking his partner to help him fill in the paper. Later, when I asked him about this, he was finally able to say that **any** paper freaked him out. Oh how I wished I had realized this two years before!

So often new students find it hard to put their fears and barriers into words. Sometimes, they don't even know what they are. Being able to identify



CHRIS FRASER

their barriers is as vital as identifying their reading levels. While I work hard to be affirming and encouraging from the start, new students come in convinced they are “dumb, stupid, slow, or just can’t learn.” All the encouraging words in the world don’t carry the impact that real illustrations of their learning skills do. In the research, when I sat with these two former students to discuss their daily learning practices and activities, they were really surprised to discover for themselves that they had in fact been learning, and mastering skills and knowledge, informally. They had minimized their experiences. This type of reflective conversation helped change their views about themselves. They began to see themselves as already capable learners rather than ‘non-readers.’

So many of the assessment tools I have been using were developed in classrooms. They tended to give me a solely academic perspective of students. This project gave me a more holistic way of looking into students’ lives. I don’t just find out their levels, capacities and styles, now I go directly to investigate what is working for them every day. I used to think I needed to help them to find a way to learn. Now I believe the challenge is for me to discover how they are already learning in their lives. Perhaps I am the only one who needed this revelation—and perhaps that is because I’ve been doing more administration than instruction—but still it was a wonderful discovery.

Working on this research also helped me discover ways to talk with students about measurable informal outcomes. Many adults perceive reading and writing as academic skills rather than life skills. Because they have ‘failed’ in the school system, adult students don’t give validity to the continuing informal learning that they do every day. Many students do not seem to realize the direct connection learning has to their lives. Now they are more willing to look at changes in their daily lives for proof of their progress.

With the best intentions in the world, I find I still make generalizations and assumptions about adult learners. My practice is in constant need of change and development. As always, it is the adult learner who ends up being the best teacher. I think this is the power of practitioner research. There is nothing like real life to illustrate truths, reveal misconceptions and empower change. Happily, not only has my practice improved, but one of my research participants was so amazed at what we discovered together that he has returned to the program for another try! ■

**Jane Boulton** has been the manager of the community literacy program in Smithers, BC since 1996. Her program has developed from a tiny volunteer tutor program to a more integrated community learning support program for learners of all ages. Jane lives contentedly with her animals in a log home on the edge of the wilderness.