

The Learning Lives of Adults with Low Literacy Skills

by **Maurice Taylor**

Very little has been systematically documented about the learning lives of adults who fall into the Levels 1 and 2 of IALS. These adults are either non-readers or have some difficulty reading simple printed materials (Calamai). A two-year project funded by the National Literacy Secretariat looked at the learning practices of adults outside of formal literacy programs. The underlying questions that drove the project were

- what types of informal learning activities do adults with low literacy skills engage, in and
- how do these activities relate to their literacy practices?

Social cognition theory helped inform the project design. This theory says that learning happens as individuals engage in communities of practice, and that literacy only makes sense when studied in the context of social and cultural practices (Taylor and Blunt; Wenger). The project defined informal learning as any

activity without curriculum imposed by a formal or non-formal educational institution. Schugurensky states that informal learning includes self-directed learning, incidental learning and tacit learning.

How was the study conducted?

We adopted an ethnographic research approach, as advocated by Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic. Through provincial literacy coalitions and groups, we looked for literacy coordinators who might be interested in the project. We chose five literacy providers from different regions of the country who worked in family, workplace and community-based provision. The researchers were Judy Purcell from Nova Scotia, Brenda Wright from New Brunswick, Angela Davis from Ontario, Andrea Pheasey from Alberta and Jane Boulton from British Columbia.

The five coordinators participated in a two-day workshop in Ottawa to learn the basic ethnographic research methods for collecting and analyzing data. The workshop included sessions on the four data collection tools, techniques for observing and interviewing learners and field note writing. When they returned to their programs, each field researcher chose two learners as their key informants. They used three criteria: that the participant had been identified as IALS Level 1 and Level 2 by the program's own assessment;



that the learner had engaged in some broadly defined learning which had occurred in the past six months; and, if the informant was enrolled in a literacy program, that the research would focus on events and activities outside of the classroom. The key informants included six males and four females, all with less than grade nine education. Four of the participants were identified as IALS Level 1 and six as IALS Level 2. All were between the ages of 30 and 45.

The researchers collected data over a three-month period. They used four data sources: a survey, observations, interviews and artifacts. The survey was administered orally. It created a detailed biographical profile of each informant and their informal learning, and helped the researchers choose which learning activities to observe. The researchers observed the informants at home, in their community and, where applicable, at work. After each observation, the researcher conducted open-ended interviews lasting up to an hour, which further explored that specific informal learning activity. The researchers also collected artifacts related to the learning event.

What did we find?

Three major themes emerged from the data: that life roles fuel informal learning, that learning happens in three significant environments, and that adults practice a range of everyday literacy skills in different milieus. These three key patterns seem to shed some light on the informal learning patterns of adults with limited literacy skills.

Life roles

Being a parent, partner, volunteer or employee precipitated much informal learning for the informants. Informal learning was a way to strengthen and maintain the quality of family life. For participants who had children, the role of parent was central. A strong family value system, coupled with a desire for better educational opportunities for their children, drove much of their informal learning. Connected to this was the role of being a supportive partner, for those who were married or living with another person, or the role of being a supportive member of the extended family.

Another key life role was that of volunteer in the local neighbourhood. Participants traced much of their informal learning to community service. The

The findings of this project are included in five reports, which are all available on NALD.

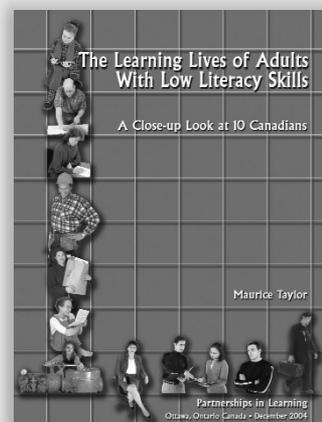
Informal Learning Practices of Adults With Limited Literacy Skills: A research summary is at www.nald.ca/fulltext/mtaylor/summary/cover.htm.

The Learning Lives of Adults With Low Literacy Skills: A close-up look at 10 Canadians is at www.nald.ca/fulltext/mtaylor/closeup/cover.htm.

Purposeful Literacies Through Informal Learning: A resource for literacy practitioners is at www.nald.ca/fulltext/mtaylor/purpose/cover.htm.

Media Analysis Report of Adult Literacy is at www.nald.ca/fulltext/mtaylor/media/cover.htm.

Connecting Research With Policy: Informal learning and media perceptions of adults with low literacy skills is at www.nald.ca/fulltext/mtaylor/policy/cover.htm.



sense of citizenship and civic engagement provided a feeling of personal well-being, especially for those who had long-term employment goals. One participant had volunteered in a neighbourhood school cafeteria to prepare breakfasts for children. Her intention behind this community service was to gain work experience that might eventually lead to paid employment. Incidental learning occurred when she learned how to take the kitchen supply inventory by recognizing food and product labels.

In the role of employee, both employed participants reported that they spent over five hours a week at work engaged in some type of informal learning related to improving an aspect of their job or enhancing the company's organizational goals.

The situated learning environment

A second pattern, which emerged from the data, was that informal learning happens in three environments: home, community and work. The home setting provided a key environment for shorter types of learning episodes related to family life such as learning about affordable housing and daycare, head lice, family budgeting, smart shopping, appliance repairs, recycling and school-related homework topics. Most of these informal learning experiences were intentional and conscious. Others were self-directed, such as learning to do home improvements like carpeting, kitchen tiling and auto body repairs. At-home learning was also related to avocational interests such as bird watching, gardening and cooking.

The community and neighbourhood were also key locations for informal learning. The library, the church, the elementary school cafeteria and the community medical centre provided the setting for self-directed and incidental learning. In one case, the participant set out to learn how to change the brakes of his mother's car. With some help from a librarian, he located the repair manual for the car, deciphered its table of contents and located and photocopied the pertinent sections. He then continued on the learning path: he searched for affordable parts and followed a 'learning by doing' approach to repair the brakes.

The workplace was also a rich informal learning environment for the two participants who were employed. One participant was a volunteer on the Safety Committee. In that role he helped write procedures to prevent further accidents in a dangerous location. Another participant spoke of his volunteer role as a learner representative on a Project Team for a workplace education program. In this role he learned to advocate for workplace learning on behalf of his fellow employees despite his limitations around spelling and writing. Although he didn't expect to learn about advocacy when he took on this role, he now saw himself as an ambassador for learning at his workplace.

The practice of everyday literacy skills

A third major pattern was that the informants all used a range of literacy skills as they learned informally in different environments. They most often practiced oral communication skills when they engaged in informal learning in all three environments (at home, in the community or at

work). Asking questions about a physiotherapy treatment, speaking to a landlord about tenant responsibilities, expressing an opinion on work safety were a few examples they gave. All informants also used reading as a key practice. They read health- and diet-related information, instructions for repairing, building and making things as well as subject-specific content in newspapers, books, flyers and seed catalogues. Some informants used computer skills to find information that would help with their children's homework, to check machine and parts inventory at the work site, and for leisure activities such as searching for sports scores and developing Christmas card lists. Informants used other literacy practices: spelling, writing, numeracy, teamwork and problem solving.

What does this mean?

Data from the survey, the observations and the interviews indicated that informants preferred to learn through observation, demonstration and by doing. In the three environments, the learning resources they used ranged from manuals, TV and internet, to talking to significant people. They also drew on their prior knowledge.

Our findings have numerous implications for research, practice and policy in adult literacy education. Little research has examined what tacit processes of informal learning adults use in their everyday literacy practices. At the federal policy level, implications from this study suggest that we need to build on the Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) system for adult education that incorporates and recognizes adults' informal learning. ■

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