

UNCOVERING

the Intangible

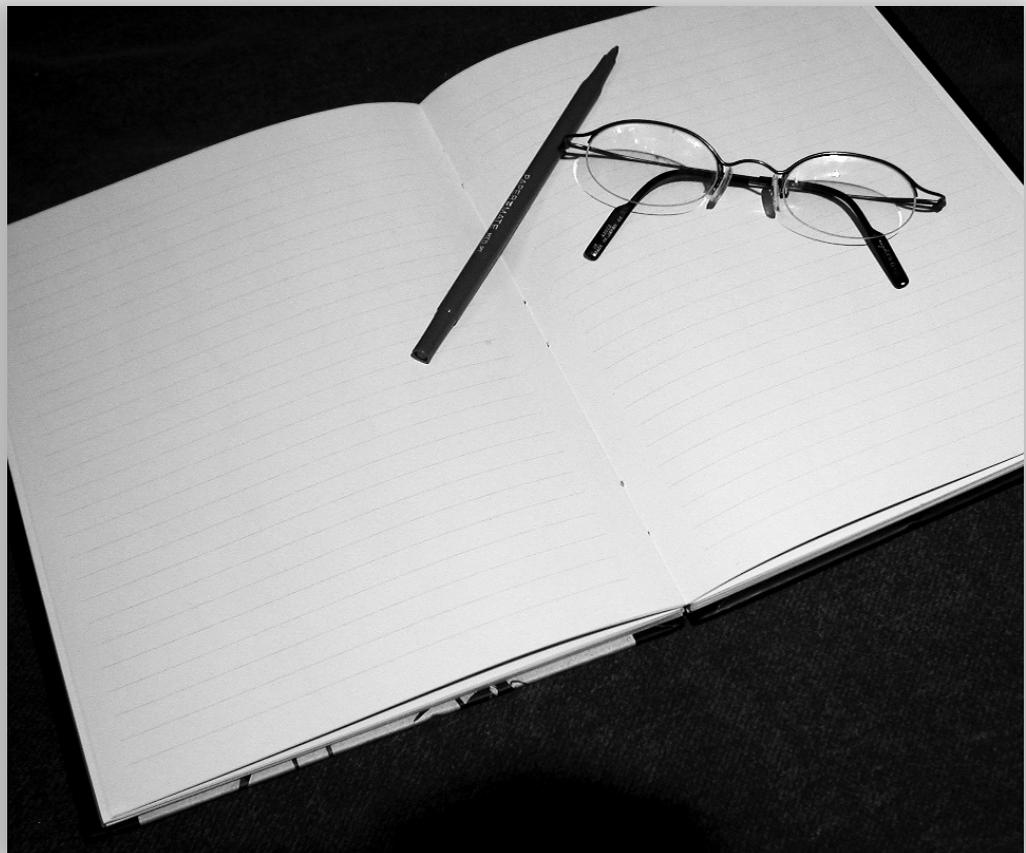
by **Corry Wink** and
Sandy Zimmerman

Reflecting on the student-tutor relationship

In July of 2003, a group of practitioners from in and around Peterborough, Ontario, received funding for our first research-in-practice project called "What makes the learner-practitioner relationship work: A research-in-practice circle analysis." We were a group of 13 literacy practitioners from five programs. Seven of the practitioners were volunteer tutors from diverse professional backgrounds who had been tutoring for different lengths of time. The other six were paid practitioners: many were administrators as well as instructors. Our group also included a project coordinator, a senior researcher, and research facilitator from Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), and an administrator. The rich diversity of participants enhanced our interchanges and insights.

We believed our research was important, so practitioners were

paid to spend 1-1/2 hours per week to journal about and reflect upon their tutoring sessions. They were also paid to attend our research-in-practice circles. At these meetings we discussed the results of our journal writing, urged each other to develop our interpretations and insights, and shared our findings.



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A new approach

Since this approach to research was new to all of us, it was very challenging to learn the strategy while producing data at the same time. We launched our project early in September. At our first research circle gathering, the senior researcher from OISE gave us an overview of the model and assured us that we were well qualified to carry out this project. While we were excited about the possibilities, most of us were uncertain about what was expected of us. We didn't know what to record in our journals or what the results of our work would be. Our instructions were general:

Write whatever comes to mind about your tutoring. Include as much as you can about the environment, your feelings, the reactions of your student, the material, the pace. Then, reflect on what you have written.

This was not an easy assignment. For some, the directions were too vague. Many of us were much more comfortable within a structured, focused environment. Would we be doing it 'right'? What was 'right'?

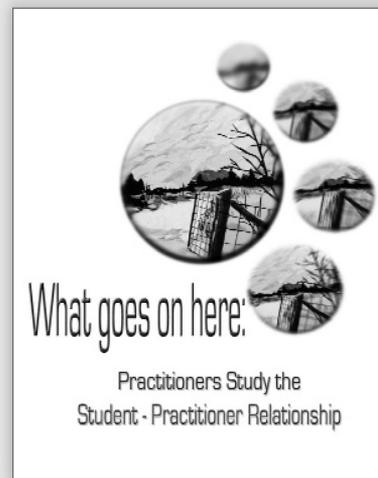
By the second meeting in late September, some of us were quite anxious. We weren't at all sure that what we were writing was meaningful or would be useful. In addition, some of the writings seemed to be repetitive. People cried out for more structure. A small group of participants took some time to develop a checklist, which would provide the guidelines they needed. The checklist included observations about the student's physical, emotional and mental states, about how the practitioner was feeling, and about the intent of the lesson and plans for the next tutoring session. Although the checklist included categories for observation, it had very little space for reflecting upon what actually occurred. However, the practitioners who used the checklist found that their observations led naturally to reflections. Reflection was always a large part of the sharing that took place when the research-in-practice circle met.

Our first two circle meetings were almost entirely devoted to venting. We talked about what wasn't happening, what was wrong, and how little time we actually had to meet to talk about our tutoring and to learn more about best practices in tutoring. We were frustrated because we had so little time to write about and discuss our work. We felt inadequate because we felt we didn't know enough. Many of us worked alone in small programs and didn't have ready access to other members of the research circle. The circle meetings became very

Reflecting on the practitioner-student relationship

by **Sandy Zimmerman**

As literacy practitioners, we know that the statistics we report to our funders tell us little about what we really accomplish in adult literacy programs. Often we marvel at the progress that our learners make, sometimes against incredible odds. The bald numbers convey nothing about the trials that have been overcome. We record improved reading levels and computational skills but these are often the least significant results we see. How do we talk about these less tangible accomplishments? What are the achievements that truly change our students' lives for the better? Why do some learners make progress and others fall by the wayside? Is there something that we do as tutors that makes a difference?



These were the questions we explored in our research. Our final report is called *What Goes On Here: Practitioners Study the Student-Practitioners Relationship*. It is available online at www.nald.ca/fulltext/whatgoes/cover.htm.

important opportunities to share our insights as well as our misgivings. For some, the meetings were rare occasions to get support from colleagues.

Moving toward insights

By the third meeting, in late October, the rich insights about our tutoring still lay hidden. We had been told at the outset that the research-in-practice circle would be experiential. None of us realized how experiential it would be!! Two participants dropped out. One of them was much more comfortable with quantitative research and our approach veered to the opposite extreme. The rest of us continued to encourage and affirm each other's

efforts. We occasionally glimpsed promising kernels of insight. At the end of each session we were a little closer to understanding what we were about, and we felt less alone. Some of us likened the pain and frustration that we were experiencing to what students might go through when they first come to adult literacy tutoring.

By November we realized we needed to focus so we could meet the project timelines. We decided to try something new, and it led some of us to a breakthrough. The project coordinator said, "Make the familiar strange. Write everything that you can about the tutoring session: facts, feelings and reactions. Then take a giant step back and pretend that you have never heard of tutoring or teaching. What do these journal entries say to you about learning and about your relationship with your student?" This prompt led to an "aha" moment, and new insights.

Interpreting our data

When we met in January, we really had to make sense of the writings in our journals—and try to

articulate what was going on and how our tutoring relationships were working. In pairs and small groups we discussed excerpts from each other's journals. We prodded each other to deepen our awareness of why we had acted in certain ways. At times we could explain. At other times, we could do no better than to say "Because, I just knew." We had no doubts about the impact upon the learning process and our relationship with our student. We came to realize how intuitive our decisions and actions were.

At this meeting, we were finally experiencing what the research-in-practice circle was all about. We were seeing clearly how we were growing as practitioners because of the process. We regretted that this part of the project was over just as we were becoming comfortable with it.

The whole process was one which called for great patience. It also required confidence in the worth of the endeavour: we had to trust that what we were recording and discussing would result in meaningful, useful conclusions. It did, but there certainly were times when many of us were tempted to question that blind trust!

Coming to conclusions

The final phase was to begin writing up our findings. We struck a report-writing committee. At first, we tried to use only the minutes of our research circle meetings. It soon became apparent that the journal entries were important data. We decided we needed all the data to write about the process and our findings. Participants handed in their journals. Almost every journal included extremely personal entries. We had agreed at the outset of the project to preserve confidentiality and anonymity, both for students and participants, and that the journals would be returned to the practitioners.

The project coordinator and an assistant coded all the journal entries according to themes that had emerged in the circle meetings. A few extra themes surfaced while they were coding the data. 'Emotional rapport' emerged as a very prominent theme. The coordinator and assistant verified all themes with data from the journals and minutes from the circles. Only then did they begin to write the report. Members of the report-writing committee revised and edited a number of drafts. The entire research circle discussed the report at our final meeting in June of 2004.

At this last meeting, we evaluated the research-in-practice circle, and the journaling and reflection

that were such a significant part of it. We felt that the process of journaling and reflecting had made us much more aware of what made our tutoring work. We also agreed that the opportunity to share our actions, decisions and insights was much too rare an occurrence in the field of adult literacy. We concluded that this research process was invaluable as a tool for professional development. Perhaps it should not come as a surprise to practitioners who continually witness their students learning that firsthand experience, although sometimes painful, is often the best teacher! ■

Corry Wink has worked in the adult literacy field since 1986. She coordinated a school board program which delivered small group classes and a community-based program that focused on one-to-one tutoring. She has recently retired from paid work but continues to volunteer as a tutor.

Sandy Zimmerman was active in the adult literacy field for over twenty years in a variety of settings. She worked as a researcher, a teacher, a student-tutor coordinator and as a volunteer. She too has recently retired and is very engaged in community-building activities in her home community of Apsley, Ontario.