

Taking Action

by Kathryn MacCuish

■ One fine Friday in late March 2006, three women embarked on a journey. Dianne, Jacqueline and Kathy were on their way to an event focused on action research, Posing Problems/Solving Problems, sponsored by Literacy Nova Scotia. The three were colleagues who worked for the Adult Learning Association of Cape Breton County (ALACBC) and were always eager to learn more about anything that might help them in their work with adult literacy learners. On their way from Sydney to Debert, a small community outside Truro, NS, where the action-research event was to be held, they talked about what they might learn. Little did they realize what they were getting into.

I was one of the women.

Being asked to write about our experiences with action research gave my friend and colleague, Dianne Gray, and me the opportunity to step back and think about what has happened in the intervening two years.

On our way to Debert, we prepared for the event by reading an adaptation of a chapter of B. Allan Quigley's book, *Building Professional Pride in Literacy*. Still, we didn't realize that attending the event meant that we would be committing ourselves to actually doing an action-research project. We

assumed that the event would be like many other learning opportunities we had taken advantage of: we would listen, discuss, reflect and perhaps use some small part in our daily work. How wrong we were.

Learning about action research

The presenter at Posing Problems/Solving Problems was Dr. Quigley himself, a professor of adult education at St. Francis Xavier University in nearby Antigonish. He is a dynamic and engaging speaker and we were soon deeply involved in learning about action research. He pointed out that,

as literacy practitioners, we stress self-reliance and critical thinking with our students. Part of this self-reliance and critical thinking is the ability to identify and address our own problems. For years, one of the main axioms of good adult literacy

practice has been to "model the behaviour you want to see." Well, we learned that in an action-research project, we systematically analyze a problem, gather evidence on observed changes and then reflect on the outcomes. In other words, we problem-pose, plan, observe and reflect. So, for literacy practitioners, the action-research model should be a natural fit. So far, so good, we thought.

Then it happened. The large and diverse group was asked to separate itself geographically. My

colleagues and I found ourselves together in a group with several other folks from Cape Breton. We were challenged to pose a problem—to identify an "itch." An "itch" is an everyday issue that keeps coming up and that seems to defy everyday attempts to do something about it. We were asked to think about why the problem existed, identify one aspect of the

problem that we wanted to address and state it in one sentence beginning with "how" or "why" or "what if." We also had to talk about any initial ideas we had about interventions that might address the problem.

We decided that we wanted to see if paying more attention to attendance issues when students begin a program would improve their attendance. The next step was to settle into the planning phase of our project.

We were asked to think about and answer a long list of questions, and to describe our proposed intervention in general terms. We decided when we would begin our intervention and when we would stop; we drew a flow chart illustrating the sequence of steps we would follow. We figured out the materials and equipment we would need and the approvals we would need to obtain. We talked about



Jacqueline Holmes reports on the Cape Breton discussion at the Posing Problems, Solving Problems event in 2006.

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how to inform the students about what we were doing and get their consent to participate. We decided how to get a baseline for comparison, what our criteria for success would be and the data collection techniques we would use. Finally, we identified barriers we thought might keep us from finishing the project and plotted ways around them before we began.

Putting our plan into action

Then we went back to Cape Breton and back to work. For the rest of the semester and during the summer, Dianne, Jacqueline and I let our plans simmer on a back burner. But when we returned to work in September, it was time to put our plan into action and to begin the observation phase. We had learned that it was important to collect data in several ways, including keeping a research journal, so that was what we did over the next three months. We talked often about what we were doing and we compared our attendance figures to the baseline data we had collected. Much to our great pleasure, our intervention seemed to pay off in improved attendance rates. At the end of the year, we wrote a report about our project and sent it off to Literacy Nova Scotia. Details of our project can be seen on the Literacy Nova Scotia website—just follow the links to Action Research Group. Excerpts of that report are included in the sidebar on this page.

As we look back at our adventures, Dianne and Jacqueline, who were much more involved in the day-to-day aspects of the project than I was, remember feeling more than a little overwhelmed at the amount of work that had to be done before the research part of the project actually began. But, as time passed, we realized that we had unknowingly been using the action-research process all along in an informal way. We found that our learners were very willing to participate in the process and took great pleasure in the necessary discussions.

What we learned

The project led to some surprising revelations. Dianne says:

We recognize that all adult learners have many barriers that keep them from attending classes. Over the years, I had heard many excuses and some of them I never truly understood. The project made it very clear that sometimes the

Action on Attendance

by Cape Breton Group,
Nova Scotia Action Research Movement

Action research means trying out new ideas as a way to improve practice and to increase what we know about the curriculum, teaching and learning. It is research that practitioners carry out to improve our professional practice and understand it better—action research links theory and practice.

The “Itch”: Poor Attendance Leading to Drop-out

We felt the following factors contribute to poor attendance: students forced to attend, fear of success or independence, no coping skills, mental health issues, addictions or substance abuse, financial problems, unrealistic goals or timelines.

We chose to address the factors that were manageable and realistic for us to deal with: fear of success or independence, no coping skills, unrealistic goals and timelines.

We discussed how students need a system of rewards such as regular recognition from peers and instructors.

Our Formal Research Question

Will student attendance and retention improve if students set goals about attendance at intake and if we recognize when students achieve these goals?

Actual intervention (September-December 2006)

- Use a closed questionnaire for intake assessment
- Set attendance goals
- Use activities (list excuses, talk about the connection between excuses and success, post an attendance record on wall)
- Measure attendance and calculate rates
- Hold focus groups at mid-term and end of term

Project participants:

Kathy MacCuish–ALACBC
Dianne Gray–ALACBC
Jacqueline Holmes–ALACBC
Brian McNeil–Glace Bay Adult Ed. Centre
Jamie MacDougall–Cape Breton-Victoria Regional School Board
Derek Bailey–Northside Adult High School

Adapted from: Cape Breton Group report, Nova Scotia Action Research Movement page, Literacy Nova Scotia website www.ns.literacy.ca/nsarmove/capebgrp.htm.

trivial excuses that we hear are not so slight to the learner and can be crippling. The transition from home back to the classroom is an overwhelming one for many. It is essential that we make that process as gentle as possible.

Dianne continues:

Our action-research project has changed my thinking and teaching processes in many ways. Now, when a problem presents itself, the whole class tries to come up with ways to support and help each other. They come up with strategies to help overcome some of the issues and suggest places that may offer courses to deal with some of it. We spend more time on building confidence, self-esteem and their individual strengths as well as those of the group as a whole. We are more involved with the community and the resources it offers.

Our project thus had some unexpected outcomes. We not only scratched our "itch" and found some strategies to improve attendance, but now all our ALACBC colleagues have a new and much-improved intake assessment procedure to use. As individuals we have grown in our practice, much to the benefit of the learners we work with. Most importantly, though, we have learned that we do not always need to look to "experts" for solutions to our problems. Sometimes we can take action ourselves and end up with a solution tailor-made to our needs.

Thank you, Allan Quigley! ■

KATHRYN MacCUISH became a teacher following graduation from university, teaching science and math in high schools in Ontario and Nova Scotia and working as a university lab instructor. After many years as a stay-at-home mother, Kathy returned to work at a local community organization, where she became involved with adult literacy and ALACBC—then the Cape Breton Literacy Network. Kathy volunteered with Laubach Literacy—locally, provincially and nationally—for more than ten years. She has been employed as an administrator with ALACBC since 1998, currently working one day a week, combining facilitation of a Seniors' Writing Circle with her administrative duties.