

Research in Practice: Trying out new ideas

by Dawn Romanowski

■ It was the very first class of my graduate studies. I did my best to conceal it, but I had no idea what my professor was talking about. "Make a list of the people in your class and the literacies that each student brings with him or her," he said, prompting a flurry of furious writing that shook the tables around me. "Literacies?" I thought to myself. "Is that even a word?"

I saw graduate studies as an escape route. I craved motivation, a challenge, fresh opportunities, a diversion from the day-to-day monotony of teaching. After having taught adult literacy and high-school courses at a learning centre for a number of years, my once-vibrant enthusiasm was fading. I began to consider my options: I could be a resource teacher, a reading clinician; I could focus on the early years. All I knew for certain was that I needed to move on. I imagined doors opening, pathways emerging, I was on my way out. And then, on the first day, I was awakened to the idea of multiple literacies. As the classes progressed, my mind unfolded as I envisioned the myriad ways that such theories as New Literacies, Critical Literacy and Sociocultural Theory could enhance and transform an adult literacy curriculum. Unexpectedly, I was on a path back to my own literacy classroom, newly energized by the opportunities awaiting me.

Once I'd absorbed the concept of multiple literacies, with the help of my class and such texts as Larson and Marsh's *Making Literacy Real*, I realized that my concept of literacy had been rather narrow. The idea that students bring literacies like language, technology and art with them to any classroom helped me to shift my focus away from the limitations of my students and toward their strengths. The notion that literacy is found in communication helped me to see the necessity of interaction in an effective literacy classroom. I began to vividly envision an actively literate adult literacy classroom, and I couldn't wait to bring it to life.

"Research in practice" sounds official and daunting and might raise the question, "How could we possibly find time for research in our busy adult literacy classrooms?" Fortunately, I didn't approach it with that phrase in mind. I was just trying things out. "Let's see how this works" was my opening thought as I walked into the classroom each morning. I wanted to create a space where students could be an integral part of a community, where they could learn to value the literacies that they brought with them. I wanted

the students in most need of help to be a part of an inclusive team. I wanted to make reading and writing purposeful and meaningful. I wanted my students to take a chance on a new kind of class where we took literacy on the road and actively engaged in projects that would empower them to see that they could have an impact on the world. If they were willing to take that chance, I was willing to run the risk of a crazy idea here and there. The worst they could say was, "We're doing what?"

But they never said that. My students were so open to change from the irrelevant, isolated norm that they were willing to try anything. Being part of a group is empowering, and through field trips and co-operative cooking and planting projects, purposeful letter writing and building projects to communicate with and raise funds for refugees on the other side of the globe, my students and I were growing together in confidence, knowledge and experience. Though I wasn't sure how field trips would go at first, I soon discovered that, no matter how many buses it took them to get there, my students would be at that library, museum or art gallery on time, rain or shine. It takes reciprocal trust to build something new together, and they never let me down. I believe that their motivation was rejuvenated along with mine by our new adventures.

That's not to say that there weren't a few hitches along the way. Email dialogue journals were a great idea in theory, and ultimately worked out in the end, but the implementation of email into a class where the students were, for the most part, unaccustomed to computers in general was a challenge. There were a few mornings in the beginning where I nearly packed up the computers and handed out paper and pens. Forgotten passwords, loss of papers with passwords on them, changed passwords, frozen computers, disks stuck in the tower (what does a disk have to do with email?) all tried our collective patience, but we stuck it out, and it was worth it. Do I believe wholeheartedly in email dialogue journals? Yes. Do I still use email dialogue journals in my much larger class this year? Well, let's just say that notebooks work just as well.

I think that the most telling and satisfying outcome of the experience has been the movement forward of each student from the initial Real Literacy classroom. One of my students has since moved on to technical college, two have moved into high-school credit courses and others have improved to the extent that they, too,

are thinking about moving forward into computer or math credit courses. Most of these students had been in literacy classes for years before we began our journey, and didn't appear to have any future educational goals. One of my main aims at the outset was to encourage my students to move out into the world, to realize their own potential. That they gained the confidence to move forward speaks to the effectiveness of such interactive theory in an adult literacy classroom.

As I proceed in my graduate studies, I continue to implement new theory into my practice. This year, since I have a number of EAL students, I've incorporated more ideas linked to interaction and oral language. I've been testing out the power of relevance in reading and writing. I've incorporated shared reading and a number of other co-operative strategies. Some ideas are successful and others aren't, but I'm always acquiring new students as my others move up and so my opportunities to learn continue.

I think that research in practice, or "trying ideas out," can only benefit both teachers and learners. What began for me as an inquiry into how the application of new theory might affect an adult

literacy classroom has now become a way of life. Now I can't stop testing theory in practice; the assigned readings from my studies have constant, tangible outcomes, and I'm stimulated and facing new challenges each day. New theory informs my practice, and the thirst for more ideas keeps me happily acquiring knowledge.

One doesn't need to attend a graduate course to be inspired by innovative ideas. Professional reading on its own can be very effective, as can the sharing of ideas with other teachers, whether within or outside your school. I think that too often we keep our great ideas and practices to ourselves, when so many could be inspired by them. ■

DAWN ROMANOWSKI is a graduate student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba. She currently teaches adult literacy at the Stevenson-Britannia Adult Learning Centre in Winnipeg.

SOURCES:

Larson, Joanne, and Jackie Marsh (2005). *Making Literacy Real: Theories and Practices for Learning and Teaching*. London: Sage Publications.

New Literacy Studies

New Literacy Studies (NLS) "assumes literacy is a critical social practice constructed in everyday interactions across local contexts" (Larson and Marsh, p. 3).

[I]n a classroom based on NLS principles, students do not understand literacy learning to be restricted to any one place or time but, rather, that it occurs in everyday activities in multiple contexts and at different times (p. 38).

NLS is inquiry-based learning which values what students already know, providing an opportunity to apply it to the wider world. It offers real experiences to expand literacy. The notion that students always bring their own literacies to a classroom is something that can easily be overlooked in a traditional classroom setting where outcomes are predetermined, and the view of literacy is limited.

How We Put New Literacy Studies to Use in Our Classroom

According to Brian Street, "New Literacy Studies can offer a solid framework for building upon what students bring with them from home and community..." (Larson and Marsh, p. 37). The idea that they bring vast knowledge and experience to the classroom is one that my students had a hard time understanding at the outset. In the first class, I listed the following three headings on the board:

Reading Writing Math

I had the students make lists under each heading of where they used each discipline in their everyday lives. After they had a chance to complete their own lists, I had students share their ideas with me as I wrote our class lists on the board, under each heading in turn. We managed to fill two full chalkboards once the ideas started flowing, and more and more new ideas were shared throughout the class. In the next phase of the discussion, I had students get into small groups and, using our exhaustive lists, come up with field trip ideas and activities we could involve ourselves in that would "make literacy real."

from "Literacy – Expanding The Definition to Create A New Kind of Adult Literacy Classroom" by Dawn Romanowski, *Journal of Adult Learning in Manitoba*, Volume 1, 2007. Available online at www.mb.literacy.ca/JALM1.pdf.