

Is accountability a barrier or an opportunity? Findings from the Connecting the Dots project

by David Hurley and Linda Shohet

■ As practitioners, we are highly aware of the increasing demands for accountability on literacy service providers across Canada. However, apart from sharing anecdotes and informal exchange, we have not had a clear picture of what these demands mean for practitioners or funders in their day-to-day work. Connecting the Dots: Improving Accountability in Adult Literacy in Canada, a two-year project launched in June 2007, is trying to answer some of these questions and open a space for more dialogue about what counts and what should count in measuring outcomes in this field.

Connecting the Dots background

The seeds of the project were planted at the Centre for Literacy's 2004 Summer Institute on Impacts of Policy on Practice when Australian researcher Joe Lo Bianco exhorted literacy practitioners to become "policy literate"—to understand how policies develop and where opportunities exist for meaningful input from the field. In 2006, a follow-up institute proposed to examine accountability and public trust in relation to adult literacy. That year many organizations across the country experienced delayed funding that cut into registration. Added to this was a reluctance to speak publicly about the issue. The institute is normally a collaborative participatory event at which registrants become presenters who share knowledge and expertise. That year, 25 people eventually came, the smallest number in many years, and only two were willing to present. Other would-be participants said they feared losing funding or jobs. One funder who had participated in past events declined to come, fearing a public attack. Only two provincial funders came.

The institute provoked animated discussion among those who did come. What's wrong with this picture? we asked. Are these fears founded? If not, what is responsible for these perceptions?

We have rich data about how accountability has impacted on community-based organizations.

From these questions, the Connecting the Dots project was developed by four literacy organizations — the Centre for Literacy of Quebec, Movement for Canadian Literacy, Literacy BC and RiPAL-BC. The project set out to examine the impact of accountability policies and practices on the adult literacy field in every province and territory, and also to help create a common language for practitioners and funders to talk about the issue. It also proposed to explore innovative approaches to accountability through five action-research projects in the second year. It was funded in 2007 through a contribution agreement with the federal Office of Literacy and Essential Skills.

What we did, what we found

In the first year, we used traditional and research-in-practice methodologies to gather information. A literature review examined publications since 1990 in diverse fields including literacy, education and public administration, and looked closely at federal and provincial documents.

The project also set up an advisory committee with representatives from academic and funding backgrounds to ensure that we had balanced input from varied perspectives. The research-in-practice component engaged seven field reviewers who interviewed 106 adult literacy practitioners and 30 funders across Canada to learn about the state of accountability practices. Individual interviews were confidential and employed a common interview protocol; focus groups were held in some instances. The field reviewers used publicly available information to create a profile of adult literacy services and accountability practices for each province and territory.

They confirmed what many practitioners already know, that accountability practices vary widely across Canada. A few provinces have comprehensive outcomes-focused accountability frameworks, while others are just beginning to examine how to hold funded organizations accountable for performance

and monies. They also collected what we believe is the richest database of input amassed anywhere in the world on impacts of accountability on community-based organizations.



Beginning a conversation

In mid-May 2008, we had the first opportunity to share our initial findings and test our hypothesis that respectful dialogue about accountability can happen.

Findings from the field and literature reviews were shared at a pan-Canadian symposium, *Moving the Conversation Forward*. Over 60 funders, practitioners and project staff met in Montreal to hear what is and is not working in adult literacy accountability practices across Canada.

Keynote speaker Professor Gilles Paquet, from Université d'Ottawa, gave an informative and provocative overview of international and national trends in accountability, with an in-depth analysis of recent conditions at HRSDC (Human Resources and Social Development Canada). He made an unsparing call to government for a return to trust, and challenged the field to examine itself with a critical eye and not assume that everything undertaken by “community” must lead to good outcomes. Jan Eldred of NIACE, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, provided insight into adult literacy and basic skills in the UK following a seven-year, multi-billion-pound investment. She noted the accomplishments and the challenges of accounting

for “targeted” results and commented on the ways practitioners have negotiated their interests.

The symposium opened discussion around the key questions: accountability for what? To whom? Providers agree strongly on their accountability to learners and to community, in addition to their funders. Discussions were organized around themes drawn from early analysis of the data. One service provider noted it was the first time he had ever talked with a funder in a neutral space where they were not negotiating or reporting. A funder admitted to initial anxiety about coming to an event where he might come under attack, but was relieved and encouraged to find a genuine openness to discuss hard issues and find common ground. Several participants suggested that they would sponsor similar conversations when they got home.

Barriers and opportunities

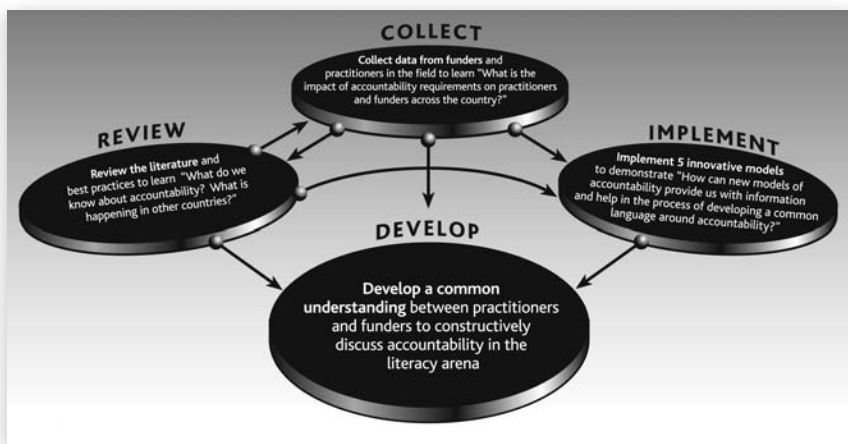
As expected, participants identified a number of barriers to establishing common ground, including problems around current processes and procedures, reporting requirements and what counts. Since one aim of the symposium was to identify ways to begin and sustain dialogue between funders and practitioners, participants were asked to phrase their barrier or concern in opportunity-focused language (*How to _____ when/and _____*). Below are examples of how they reframed some barriers and obstacles:

Design

- How to allow flexibility and meet community needs, while abiding by terms of agreement
- How to negotiate reciprocal accountability processes while staying true to our respective values and goals
- How to get funders to focus on inputs as well as outcomes—we need to talk about how inputs affect outcomes; maybe we can measure progress by what goes in (not just the money)
- How to take “top-down” policy criteria (e.g., essential skills) and make them fit the recipients’ local frameworks while satisfying both parties

Reporting/Metrics

- How to identify the common elements of reporting to multiple funders and meet the accountability requirements while not



The symposium heard findings from the literature and field reviews. The next phase of the Connecting the Dots project involves five action research projects to explore innovative accountability practices and policies. Read more on the project website: www.literacyandaccountability.ca.

In some parts of the country, progress was reported in increasingly reflecting community needs and accomplishments and learner outcomes through storytelling. Innovative approaches are in place

- driving ourselves crazy
- How to improve accountability without increasing the burden on all players
- How to develop the capacity to help us collect learners' stories (qualitative and quantitative)

Making a case

- How can the research community work to measure the impact of low adult literacy on employment, family, criminal behaviour, etc.
- How to bring adult literacy services "out of the church basement" to a higher level without losing the informal nature and approaches that are needed by the most vulnerable learners
- How to activate/integrate the passion/conviction for adult literacy by government officials within the confines of government

What's working?

An unexpected outcome was the large number of comments from the interviews and the symposium about what is working well. Providers appear to share a general consensus that some type of accountability is needed and, overall, are not averse to being held accountable for program performance. In fact, they mentioned "secondary benefits" and unintended consequences that have resulted from accountability expectations. Providers noted that being "forced to ask what we are doing well and examine what works" can push the agency to really work toward a common purpose. In some agencies, there is now better infrastructure, and practitioners are becoming trained and aware of how to use data for their own purposes. Increased tracking can lead to the discovery of new areas of information or data to track, and maybe—soon or someday—to report on.

in some jurisdictions. Two examples are the legacy program in Saskatchewan that handles annual funding renewals, which minimizes accountability demands for programs with a good track record, and attempts in Newfoundland to limit paperwork. Some jurisdictions reported an improved capacity to negotiate with the provincial/territorial program manager who oversees the program.

Overall, despite tension in a limited number of places, interviewees described relationships between funders and providers as responsive and respectful. A funder quoted in the field review presentation noted:

Program visits are so important. I have good relationships with the field and I think they're comfortable calling me with problems. Personal interface and discussion can lead to discussing issues that may not have come up in other ways. That interaction gives you information that you can never capture in forms on the computer.

Moving forward

A number of themes emerged from the symposium that can transform identified barriers and challenges into opportunity-focused actions to improve the state of accountability practices in adult literacy.

Political acumen

All participants recognized the importance of being engaged in the political process, to champion literacy as part of social and economic progress and to learn how to take advantage of the current

political system to advocate for better literacy services. It is recognized that accountability can help make this happen: accountability requirements are not likely to disappear and, as noted, they have had some positive unintended consequences for providers. Used well, they can provide evidence of literacy successes, and can include qualitative as well as quantitative indicators.

Funders recognized that they have a role in translating the needs and challenges experienced by the field back to senior government officials. Sometimes feeling “caught in the middle” between these officials and the practitioners, funders said that the Office of the Auditor General “needs to be aware of the cost of accountability on the operations of government and how it impacts delivery.”

Literacy providers recognize that they need to be more proactive rather than reactive in dealing with potential changes at the government level. A general theme emerged by the end of the symposium that it is time for the literacy field to stop feeling “victimized” and to take charge of the conversation about the future of literacy and the impact of accountability. This includes harnessing the power of their boards, showcasing success stories and the benefits of literacy in the local media and to government, and becoming advocates for learners and literacy.

This also includes working to change the message and meaning of literacy, to join with government forces that view it as an economic development tool and help to support that point of view while broadening and expanding it.

Communication

Funders acknowledge the need to improve communication among themselves about the challenges and successes related to accountability. They talked about being “out there” more often, listening to practitioners’ stories and concerns. They also noted that they could more effectively explain the reasons behind many accountability expectations and changes. Both groups recognized that better communicating funders’ sense of being caught in the middle, especially to the field, could improve understanding between all parties.

Providers realize that communication—to the media, to current and former learners, to board members and to the communities being served—is key. Much discussion centred on how to “share learners’ stories” in ways to both enhance and replace some of the more quantifiable data that is demanded. Bringing boards “on board” is also crucial; if they understand accountability demands they are in a better position to advocate and educate about the important role of adult literacy in the community.

Next steps

There is some hope that the findings from the project can inform the current national Blue Ribbon Panel consultations that are developing recommendations on how to simplify the administration of federal grants and contribution agreements. The project is communicating with the Treasury Board department that is managing the process.

Overall, providers are not averse to being held accountable for program performance. Being “forced to ask what we are doing well and examine what works” can push agencies to really work toward a common purpose.

The second year of Connecting the Dots will see the publication and dissemination of the literature and field review reports in print and online. Some plain-language research briefs for specific audiences will be written. Most critical, several action-research projects have been selected and will be funded until May 2009 to explore how accountability models for adult

literacy might be reconfigured to better meet the needs of providers, funders and, ultimately, Canadian learners.

The project website (www.literacyandaccountability.ca) includes the literature review and report of the field review findings, profiles for each province or territory, and staff and committee lists. Descriptions and updates on the action research projects will be posted regularly. ■

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