

APPROACHING CANADIAN ADULT LITERACY RESEARCH AS A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE: IMPLICATIONS AND POSSIBILITIES

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Abstract

In recent years there has been significant interest in increasing educational research capacity in many countries and many fields, including Canadian adult literacy and numeracy education. This article asks what we can learn by taking a community of practice approach to research capacity, using as an illustration the work of the National Literacy Secretariat 1998-2003. Analysis brings forward a number of key recommendations useful to consider in discussions of educational research capacity. Implications are that communicative infrastructure is vital, social networks are key, current research needs to be better integrated with past research, and that increasing research capacity goes hand in hand with strengthening community.

Résumé

Depuis quelques années, un intérêt substantiel s'est développé dans différentes branches de recherche et dans de nombreux pays portant sur l'accroissement de la capacité pour la recherche éducationnelle. Cette tendance s'est également produite dans les domaines de l'alphabétisation et de la numératie des adultes au Canada. Cet article présente les leçons à tirer d'une approche basée sur les communautés de pratique, en prenant comme exemple le travail du Secrétariat national à l'alphabétisation. L'analyse présentée permet d'identifier des recommandations clés à considérer dans les discussions sur le développement de la capacité de recherche. Cette étude démontre que l'infrastructure de communication entre les membres de la communauté est primordiale, que les réseaux sociaux sont d'une importance clé, que les recherches actuelles auraient besoin d'être mieux intégrées aux précédentes, et que l'augmentation de la capacité de recherche va de pair avec le renforcement de la communauté elle-même.

Adult literacy and numeracy education, including English as a Second Language, GED, and Access programs—remains one of the most widespread and fundamental areas of adult education provision around the world. Interestingly, however, the amount of research in adult literacy is relatively limited, and this is as true in Canada as elsewhere. There are a number of possible reasons for the dearth of research and, hence, research-based information. On the demand side of the equation, there are limited amounts of

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funding available for the work and, in Canada especially, few publishing outlets devoted to literacy issues (though there are remarkably strong exceptions). On the supply side, few researchers in universities or at the community level work exclusively in adult literacy and numeracy, with research spread widely across organizations that are often only peripherally involved in this activity. It seems reasonable to assume that increasing the research activity around literacies would mean addressing both sides of the equation, and that the two sides are mutually reinforcing. As more people became active in literacies research, more resources are likely to follow them into the field, bringing about an increase in research capacity.

In this discussion, I begin with the premise that increased research activity in adult literacies would be a good thing (and surely better than the alternative). As more research is conducted by researchers and practitioners, more options become available to literacy educators and practice decisions can be made in a more informed manner. The possibility of a professionalized workforce (meant in the positive sense of the word, referring to the possibility of secure long-term contracts and living wages) is enhanced as the knowledge base of the field is expanded and solidified. At the same time, theorization can become more sophisticated as more is known about the intersection of philosophy and practice. Increased research capacity can lead to enhanced capacity to practise and to understand that practice. In this article, I use ideas derived from communities of practice models of learning (Wenger, 1998) to think through what might be needed to bring about increased research capacity.

The analysis presented here is focused on a review of the work of the Canadian National Literacy Secretariat (NLS). The NLS provided Canadian literacies researchers with a significant and remarkably consistent source of dedicated funding for many years. The discussion of communities of practice and research capacity is contextualised within a 2004 review of NLS research. In September 2006, the NLS suffered significant funding cuts, and the implications for research support are far from clear now that it is part of the Adult Learning, Literacy and Essential Skills Program. Nonetheless, for the period of its existence, the NLS research support made a significant contribution to literacy research capacity in Canada.

It would be misleading to give the impression that the NLS was the only organization supporting literacy research during this period. There was very strong interest in connections between literacy and health, and a significant research program to support this interest (National Literacy and Health Research Project Team, 2004). A second great strength of Canadian research in adult literacy has been practitioner research, which has been as good as any in the world (Quigley & Norton, 2002). A number of provincial and national literacy organizations have also contributed significantly to the conduct of literacy research in Canada, as well as agencies less directly concerned with literacy, such as unions. This has been true both in the anglophone and francophone communities, and it is worthwhile consulting the National Adult Literacy Database (www.nald.ca) and the Base De Données En Alphabétisation Des Adultes (www.bdaa.ca) to get a sense of the scope of activity. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council has provided support for adult literacy research in the past, though it is worth noting that the Canadian Language & Literacy Research Network (www.cllrnet.ca) appears to have moved away from an interest in adult literacy toward a stronger focus on children's literacy. The Canadian Council on Learning (

cca.ca), an extremely new organization, funds research in adult learning, though to date only two projects have dealt with language acquisition. The final location for literacy research is the range of universities that include this area among their interests.

Clearly the NLS fits within a bigger picture of literacy research, but there are three reasons for thinking that the lessons learned from NLS research can have wider applicability. The first is simply the scale of NLS investment in literacy research, which is far greater than any other organization. The second is the age of the NLS; it has been a force in Canadian literacy for over 15 years. The third reason is the pervasiveness of the NLS. Its support and resources have been significant for each of the other actors in the field of literacy research, and it is hard to find a corner of the Canadian literacy firmament that has remained unaffected by NLS activities. While not all Canadian literacy research is NLS research, it is reasonable to see the work of the NLS as highly indicative of the form and purpose of the field.

This article suggests that communities of practice models provide a useful way to think about research work in literacy and in education more generally, and that research funding in a new field should recognize strengthening the community of practice as a valuable outcome. This approach emphasizes the social nature of research work and the ways it is embedded in collective endeavour. It provides a response to changes such as the recent emphasis on scientifically based research in the United States, with its clear commitment to positivist academic value at the cost of localized activities such as practitioner-based work (Belzer & St. Clair, 2005). Research by and for humans is not an abstract activity, but an interactive social endeavour.

A Brief Review of Communities of Practice

Originally, the concept of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) was insightful, contributed a great deal to learning theory, and was relatively straightforward. A community of practice was a group of people who could do something, and the way one learned to do the same thing was through participation in the group, initially on the fringes and later as a full member. This is very similar to the way that apprenticeship works; an apprentice plumber (for example) starts by doing simple tasks and works up to full membership in the trade. This highly intuitive model has some interesting implications, including the notion that the current members of the group have to "approve" the participation of potential new members as legitimate.

In 1998, Etienne Wenger published the book seen as the definitive volume on communities of practice as a learning theory. It is a far more complex book than the earlier publication, and seems strongly concerned with lodging the concept within existing sociological theory. It is interesting to see the detailed reasoning behind Wenger's version of the communities of practice model, but it is a dense text that obscures the fundamentally intuitive nature of the basic idea. Wenger turns the original insight into a major project and maps out a wide range of theoretical and practical concerns associated with it. Because the project is so large, there is no longer an easily bounded idea of "communities of practice"—instead, people hoping to apply the concept may find it more helpful to focus on a few relevant aspects at a time. In this discussion, I look at three specific elements of the model, which I will return to after sketching in some more general background.

A community of practice is a group of people who share ways of working in the world, and it is these shared practices that bind the community together. At their heart, communities of practice are practical and pragmatic configurations of people. They are also not exclusive; they can overlap and be nested within one another. This also means that different cuts across social formations can reveal or conceal communities of practice within the same groups of people. So, for example, if we consider religious leaders as a group, we could look at the prayer leadership community of practice, and argue that all religious leaders are part of this community. But if, instead, we were to look at administering the Host (a key aspect of Christian practice) we would find that this community excluded all non-Christians, and we could call into doubt the existence of a religious leadership community of practice. One of the key considerations for this theoretical field—and perhaps one where power is most overtly exercised—is how boundaries are set, and by whom. How the community of practice is defined makes all the difference to what can be seen and said.

My approach is to consider communities of practice as operating within an elected domain. You choose to become a member of the educational research field, so that can be considered a community of practice, whereas being a language user—intrinsic to all humans—cannot. The first practice shared by the members of a community of practice, then, is the decision to be part of that community of practice.

The first of Wenger's (1998) elements I will highlight here is mutual engagement, which he sees as the defining characteristic of a community of practice. He states: "Practice does not exist in the abstract. It exists because people are engaged in actions whose meanings they negotiate with one another" (p. 73). The primary resource for the creation of communities of practice is social relationships, even if they are mediated by books, computers, distance, time, or otherwise. So as an adult educator, I am a member of the adult education community of practice insofar as my practices are supported by social relationships. The meaning of my actions as an educator has been created and agreed through the vehicle of the community of practice. This negotiation of meaning brings the community of practice into being and also perpetuates its existence.

Mutual engagement is a more complicated idea than it sounds, and it is worth thinking about briefly. Imagine you have invented a new genre of music. You play it to your friend, who loves it. "That's so cool, what do you call it?" your friend asks. You make up a name on the spot, say "Afrocanbeat." Your friend is delighted and rushes off to fire up the laptop and create some of her own Afrocanbeat, which she brings back to you the next day. It is almost guaranteed that the next thing to happen will be a long discussion about whether your friend's music is really Afrocanbeat. This is the first example of mutual engagement to negotiate the meaning of the practices of the community. Anybody who wants to work in Afrocanbeat will have to engage with the results of that negotiation. Afrocanbeat means what you and your friend decide it means—therefore, shaped by your practices—but also defines what counts as legitimate—therefore, shaping practices. This example is obviously dramatically oversimplified and even a bit silly, but it helpfully highlights the mutual influences of communities and practices, mediated through the mutual engagement of members. In educational research, mutual engagement is represented by conferences, academic journals, books, Web sites, and other less formal social relationships.

The second element inherent to communities of practice is joint enterprise, which can be understood as a shared goal. Wenger (1998) suggests that the joint enterprise arises out of negotiation, is defined in the process of pursuing it, and creates a pattern of mutual accountability. This does not mean that there is a formal meeting for the purpose of setting an aim, but that there is a dynamic process where tradition and history meet with the ideas and influences of new members in a constantly evolving set of aspirations. Within the educational researcher community, the joint enterprise might be creating knowledge that can improve the quality of education, but the meaning of that phrase will change over time. Different methods and approaches will come and go, and the standards to which researchers can be held accountable will change along with them. Another example is a band (perhaps playing Afrocanbeat!) where the overall aim of earning a living playing music can take on very different shades depending on career stage and membership.

The idea of mutual accountability within joint enterprise is important and multifaceted. On one hand, there is the need to work effectively and efficiently toward the set goal, but on the other, there is also the expectation that individuals will work within the social network of the community and its rules and norms. Professional societies often have mechanisms for excluding members who breach these rules. Even if a lawyer obtains universally excellent results in representing clients, if this is not accompanied by acceptable ethics, exclusion from the Law Society is a real danger. Different communities of practice will have these norms more or less explicitly thought through and laid out, and potentially monitored and sanctioned in different ways. The way that joint enterprise and mutual accountability work within educational research should be fairly clear. The aim is the production of insightful findings with the potential to raise or resolve questions around educational quality, and the accountability comes from funders, ethics boards, professional guidelines, and so on.

The shared repertoire is the final element in a community of practice. Wenger (1998) suggests the repertoire "includes routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions or concepts that the community has produced or adopted in the course of its existence and which have become part of its practice" (p. 83). There are a huge range of possibilities here, and many levels of complexity that could be considered, but what pulls the actions together into a repertoire rather than just a random collection of resources is that they belong to the community of practice. In educational research, the repertoire includes the range of research methods open to researchers. It should be noted that each member of a community of practice does not have to use each resource; rather, the key feature is the existence of a shared repertoire to draw on.

Because communities of practice are defined by actions, the repertoire is a crucial consideration. This is the content of the community of practice, the stuff of its existence. The two other elements, engagement and aim, represent the framework for that content. However, the repertoire is likely to be no more static than any other element of the community of practice, reflecting the resources of new members as well as the continuing negotiations of established members. An example of this is a research team bringing an expert on a specific method, such as an ethnographer. On one hand, the ethnographer will have a range of tricks and techniques to offer the team, but on the other, having that person's skills will also allow the team as a whole to develop new

strategies. The skills of the individual have the potential to become part of the repertoire of the community.

Wenger's (1998) model of a community of practice both facilitates and limits activity. By joining a community of practice, you gain access to a wide range of meanings and resources in return for accepting accountability to the community. The elements of mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire all fit together and reinforce each other, weaving a mesh that is fairly flexible but still capable of constraint. The nature of the community defines what is possible for members, but also goes beyond this to affect the identity of those involved in the community (Hung & Chen, 2002).

One important question to many who adopt a community of practice perspective on learning and activity is how to think about the strength and effectiveness of a given community. What are the hallmarks of a better community of practice, and indeed why would one be desirable? Does a broader repertoire of actions equate to a better community of practice? Is there a threshold of mutual engagement over which a good community of practice must pass? How tightly defined must the joint enterprise be? Unfortunately, there are no clear answers. What I would like to suggest, however, is that for the purposes of this discussion, it is accepted that strategies likely to enhance each of these three elements—engagement, enterprise, repertoire—are likely to enhance the community of practice.

There are a number of less positive aspects of communities of practice that are important to acknowledge before turning more squarely toward educational research. Communities of practice can prevent achievement of ends, or exclude people. What happens to the failed Afrocanbeatists? In addition, being a member of a bad community of practice, such as an educational research setting where the usual ethical guidelines designed to protect participants are routinely ignored, may not be a positive experience. Wenger (1998) does not really spend a great deal of time exploring these issues, but notes that communities of practice models are attempts at description, not moral prescription. A community of practice is only good or useful if its outcomes and implications are good and useful. It is extremely important to think about why a community of practice would be a good approach in a specific case.

Communities of practice tend to be conservative, preserving the way things have always been done. As Tusting (2006) puts it, "While communities of practice are understood as being centrally about ongoing processes of negotiation of meaning, much more attention is given to how these processes maintain communities in existence than to how communities themselves change" (p. 44). Wenger (1998) also discusses this, using slightly different language:

When a community makes learning a central part of its enterprise, useful wisdom is not concentrated at the core of its practice. There is a wisdom of peripherality—a view of the community that can be lost to full participants. It includes paths not taken, connections overlooked, choices taken for granted . . . it can easily become marginalised within established regimes of competence. (p. 216)

Many communities of practice can overlook this wisdom of peripherality, and focus resources on the core knowledge and the core participants. In educational research,

there is a tendency for those who have more experience to get more grants, an inherently centripetal tendency that, if unchecked, could create an elite of researchers. This point reflects the question of power, which Wenger (1998) does not address in any great depth. He suggests that:

Claiming that communities of practice are a crucial locus of learning is not to imply that the process is intrinsically benevolent. In this regard, it is worth repeating that communities of practice should not be romanticized: they can reproduce counterproductive patterns, injustices, prejudices, racism, sexism, and abuses of all kinds. (p. 132)

This statement is a long way from an analysis of how relations of oppression operate within communities of practice. Wenger, it has been suggested, "deflects his focus away from power and the creation of higher level institutional structures" (Barton & Hamilton, 2005, p. 19). There is a lot of potential for research to understand how power operates within communities of practice, and how it acts as a fundamental enabling and controlling dimension.

Educational Research as a Community of Practice

Based on this discussion of communities of practice, it may seem quite evident that the three aspects of the model described will ring true for educational researchers. Mutual engagement is a critical part of the educational research endeavour, occurring through texts of many sorts as well as through less formal forms of engagement, such as conversations and conferences. The joint enterprise of educational research can be broadly considered as organizing knowledge to improve people's learning; mutual accountability is tied to this aim in the forms of professional practices and methodological expectations. Similarly, there is an agreed, shared repertoire of possible ways to pursue the joint enterprise in terms of methods. There are many ways of relating to this community of practice and, indeed, many sub-communities and overlapping communities. There is also a need to recognize that the related issues of exclusion, conservatism, and power manifest in this community as much as any other, and are constantly renegotiated and reworked by community participants. One of the clearest examples of this is participant research, which has long struggled for legitimacy alongside more academically driven models.

The notion that educational research can be approached as a community of practice is obvious enough that it is not new. In the presidential address for the British Educational Research Association, Anne Edwards (2002) argued that "it is worth staying with the basic idea offered by Lave & Wenger that knowledge and possibilities for action are distributed within communities which share common histories and goals and are revealed in the actions taken" (p. 163). Hodkinson (2004) takes the idea further, suggesting that "all academic knowledge is socially constructed. This construction is not primarily an individual activity, but is the collective working of a community of scholars, over history" (p.11). Hodkinson also expresses skepticism toward the idea of a unified educational research community of practice that can be considered in any way coherent. Hammersley (2005) summarizes the discussion so far, suggesting that two sets of conclusions can be drawn. The first is that while communities of practice models can be insightful, they fail to resolve key issues, such as whether educational research is one community of practice or many. Hammersley wonders whether the insight offered by the

theory can be considered new in any meaningful way. The second set of conclusions is about separation of the researcher and educator community of practice, where he suggests the obvious conclusion is to reduce that separation by getting researchers closer to practice. But, he then asks, why not do away with the separation between educators and the people actually performing the practical activities? This suggestion is intended to appear absurd to schoolteachers, though it may sound like an interesting idea to adult educators. Overall, this discussion seems to suggest that the best approach to communities of practice models is to see them as useful heuristics but not an inclusive final theory.

In this spirit, it is possible to see that viewing educational research as a community of practice highlights a number of aspects of the field that are not always taken into account. One of the most challenging implications is that strengthening the educational research community of practice requires going beyond the conventional measures of research quality, such as the rigour of the method or the effect on practice in schools. These concerns do not lose their importance, but are accompanied with questions about communication among researchers, the degree to which they have a common orientation to their task, and the extent to which they agree on the sorts of tools and approaches they bring to the task. The notions of mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire can help to identify a set of critical issues for thinking about research capacity.

The community of practice approach could be read as valuing convergence, where everybody ends up researching the same things in the same way (Hammersley, 2005), but that is far from inevitable. In the case of the repertoire of methods, for example, the point is not that all researchers use the same method, but that they all value a wide range of methods. The agreement lies in valuing diverse approaches, not in embracing and applying the same approach. Similarly, a common orientation to the task does not mean a simplistic commitment that all educational research should do the same thing, but a negotiated recognition of the diverse ways in which educational research can fit into—and challenge—the pragmatic business of education.

The aim of this paper is to consider what this approach can tell us about Canadian literacy research in particular; the most effective way to do this is to look at the current and historical patterns in the field. The main focus of this study is a review of the NLS's research funding mechanism conducted in 2004. While this funding stream does not account for all literacy research in Canada, I suggest that it is sufficiently central for the issues raised in the NLS funding to have a high degree of salience throughout the field.

Background to the Review of NLS Research

The intense involvement of the NLS in literacy research across Canada comes about, to some extent, because of the political peculiarities of the federal, provincial, and territorial system. In Canada, education is a provincial and territorial responsibility, and the federal government is careful to respect this boundary by allowing provinces and territories to design their educational systems according to local needs. In the case of literacy, this has two implications. First, any literacy activity by the federal government has to come under the rubric of workforce development, which is a federal responsibility. Second, the division of responsibilities has evolved over many years, so that the federal government

can support pilot programs and research in adult literacy while the provinces and territories manage the programs that provide services directly to learners. The research role of the NLS, as defined by the terms and conditions approved by Treasury Board for the National Literacy Program, is "to stimulate applied research and development initiatives which address the needs of literacy practice and practitioners." The NLS is by far the biggest funder of adult literacy research in Canada.

In the mid-1990s, the NLS decided to review its approach to research support. It organized three policy conversations between January 1995 and February 1996 on the topics of new technologies and literacy, workplace/workforce literacy, and literacy research. The outcomes of these policy conversations, when combined with other input, led to the development of the *NLS Research Framework* in 1998. The *Framework* was:

intended to enhance the cooperation between the NLS and its partners to support research itself and to promote the dissemination and application of research results to literacy policy and practice. This framework will guide future NLS efforts to strengthen research and enhance its relevance to the broad goals of both the NLS and the literacy community. (National Literacy Secretariat, 1998, p. 1)

The *Framework* generally praised the NLS for its research work to date, and was especially positive about the responsive model of funding, which allowed the type and method of research to be based on the expressed needs of the field. The document also suggested that the scope and quality of the research could be more tightly monitored, and that the dissemination of results to the field was not always adequate. There were also a number of specific suggestions regarding research, listed in seven guiding principles and four goals, with each of the goals having a number of support areas. In addition, there was a list of four types of research supported by the NLS. However, the document did not pull this network of ideas and principles into pragmatic recommendations for running a research program, leaving implementation to NLS staff. One of the purposes of the review of research in 2004 was to examine the extent to which research had truly reflected the framework over the last five years.

Some of the complexities facing the 2004 review arose from the significant changes in literacy over the last five years. There have been two competing tendencies. On one hand, the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS; Statistics Canada, 1996) has made available more quantitative information on literacy activities than ever before. It is now possible to compare adult literacy activities between countries, and to use that information to make comparative judgements regarding literacy and economic outcomes. For example, one recent publication argues that literacy scores are a better predictor of human capital growth (and, therefore, a nation's wealth) than years of schooling (Coulombe, Tremblay, & Marchand, 2004). On the other hand, there has been increasing interest in complex models of literacy as a set of social practices (Barton, 1994), and the idea that people are engaged in multiple literacies. Both of these tendencies have influenced NLS research, and they have often pulled in opposite directions. Is literacy a single factor that can be measured and compared across countries, or is it a complex set of social relationships and practices that depends to a large extent on context?

The answer is likely to be that it is both, depending on how it is measured. The discussion continues in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom, among many

other places (for example, see Derrick, 2003). The lack of clarity around this issue, and many others in literacy, presents a real challenge for research reviewers and program evaluators. The chosen model of literacy will strongly influence how judgements are made and what those judgements will be. For example, a strong believer in multiliteracies would look for ethnographic research that documents the intricacies of social practice, whereas somebody operating within the IALS framework would want to see statistical research.

The review of NLS-sponsored research had to find a way to go beyond the complexities of the specific theoretical perspectives adopted in 434 projects and look at whether they achieved what they had set out to achieve, both individually and programmatically. The obvious starting point was the 1998 *Framework*, but it did not provide clear objectives for the research program against which the actual projects could be reviewed. This suggested that a broader view might be helpful. When the NLS was originally established within the Secretary of State's office, one of the intentions was to use research as a tool for community development—a way to get resources and knowledge to grassroots literacy programs. It seemed reasonable to consider using an approach that assessed how the NLS had contributed to the community of literacy in Canada, and Wenger's (1998) framework appeared to provide a way to think about these issues. This model allowed the review to focus on the extent to which the NLS research program has contributed to the three aspects of community discussed earlier, and how it would be possible to strengthen that contribution. This approach provided a theoretical grounding for the review without limiting what counted as “good” or “valuable” research.

Overview of the NLS Research

The NLS has provided grants to a huge number of projects over its lifetime, and over 400 between 1998 and 2003, so the first stage of the review was to produce some overall analyses to make the review task more manageable. Canada is a bilingual country, and one of the most important questions was how many projects were sponsored in each language. The NLS has consistently funded an average of 25% French research, with the rest in English. This percentage is close to the proportion of francophones in Canada (almost 7 million at the last census) and can be regarded as a reasonable distribution.

The projects were divided among 18 target groups, and it was interesting to review which groups have gained or lost over the review period. For example, research in Aboriginal literacy represents 5% of the projects on average, though this includes a high of 10% in 2001–2002 and a low of 3% the following year. The biggest single category was literacy experts (14%), referring to support given to academics and other professional researchers, and which included many nationally significant initiatives. Other important target groups were learners and students, practitioners and tutors, family literacy, and youth literacy. The mean length of grants was around nine months. Grant amounts are always interesting, and the average grew substantially over the period, from \$44,000 to \$60,000. Examining the grants overall shows that there has been a reduction in the proportion of grants below \$20,000 and above \$100,000, suggesting that the NLS may have learned that its most efficient grant size is between these two figures. One possible concern is that the reduction in small grants may make it harder for new researchers to get started.

The review also looked at what the projects set out to achieve, and created nine categories for outcome. The areas of basic research, needs assessments, and teaching strategy expanded from 32% to 61% of the projects funded. Basic research sets out to expand the knowledge base in literacy by examining fundamental questions, such as what learners think literacy is. One cause for concern was the expansion of needs assessments (29% in 2002), which tend to have very localized results, and perhaps contribute less to the literacy community as a whole than other types of research.

The impression that arises from the overview is the diversity of NLS research in terms of both method and outcome. The NLS has supported a vast range of different projects on many different topics, though the comment from the 1998 *Framework* on the need for better dissemination had some justification. The NLS files are a goldmine of insights and information, much of which is not available to the field despite the commitment of researchers to distribute it. It would be very helpful for the NLS to find a way to ensure that the information generated from the research it funds reaches the field more directly and effectively, though it should be recognized that this is an almost universal issue for research.

A Closer Look: Developing a Matrix

As well as looking at the broad picture of the research projects, the review examined a subset of projects in more detail. The two target groups purposely selected were categorized (by the NLS) as Aboriginal literacy (AL) and literacy experts (LE). These two categories were chosen to demonstrate maximum variance. First Nations researchers had previously stated that they considered their area to be substantially underdeveloped, so it seemed interesting to see how this came out in the criteria scores. For obvious reasons, I expected the LE category to show the broad strengths of research. By comparing the two, I was hoping to learn more about how an underdeveloped area of the literacy research community could be strengthened. The review covered six categories, designed to cover both conventional measures of research capacity and quality (items 1–3) and broader impacts on the literacy community (items 4–6).

Systematic Approach

Irrespective of the details of the method, did the research project demonstrate a clearly organized approach to gathering and analyzing information? This does not mean that the project necessarily had to adopt a formal research model (such as a written survey), but it does imply that careful thought was given to how information would be managed and that similar research projects were used as reference points for the design of the current project.

Cumulative Approach

The project should recognize previous work that has been done on the topic and ideally attempt to synthesize it as a starting point for the current project. Much educational research (particularly in literacy) has been criticized for lacking cumulative potential, meaning that each project starts again at square one as if no research has ever been done upon the topic, rather than work with what already exists. Even localized work, such as a needs assessment, has a body of previous writing and resources to draw upon.

Contribution

This is the traditional measure of quality in basic research, attempting to capture the degree to which the project has contributed to the overall body of knowledge on the topic. Many NLS projects do not have contribution as a proposed outcome, and it should not be assumed that having a low level of this criterion is necessarily a criticism. However, many projects do make a useful contribution, and it is important to acknowledge this fact.

Immediate Impact

Many of the research projects funded by the NLS do not make any claim to generate broadly applicable knowledge that is useful for other people; their concern is with the improvement of programming in specific settings. This criterion attempts to capture the extent to which a project has had an impact upon the practices of the agency or organization conducting it. It will vary widely depending on the research method and the intention of the people involved.

General Impact

In addition to immediate impact, research can make a difference to practices beyond the context in which it is conducted without having broad abstract or theoretical implications. An example is good practices, which can be identified and recommended to programs without necessarily changing the way education is understood. If a project discovers that intensive entry interviews help with retention, interviews can be recommended to other programs purely on a pragmatic basis.

Research Preparation

Projects may also have significant impacts on the ability of the Canadian literacy community to conduct high quality research. An example would be when a project involves several graduate students or community members who are able to continue adult literacy research after the end of the initial project. Strong examples of this criterion were more likely to be found in the LE category than others, as many of these projects were designed to achieve this effect.

Results of the Matrix

Each of the projects in the LE and AL categories were assigned high, medium, or low values for each of these six criteria. The assumption was not that high was better than low in each project, which would make it a system for informal grading. Instead, the aim was to look across the whole research area and identify areas of strength and weakness. The two categories contained 80 projects, almost 20% of the total funded by the NLS in the review period, though only 48 were available for review. This was due to projects being too new to show results, the criteria not being appropriate for the specific project, or gaps in record-keeping. There proved to be some interesting differences and similarities between the projects.

Looking first at the three conventional measures, LE projects generally showed more evidence of a systematic approach to the research by providing details of the way information would be generated and analyzed. However, the most common method was an informal qualitative approach based on interviews and surveys. Hardly any of the projects tackled research issues such as how their findings could be generalized. Neither

category scored very high on cumulative approach—there was little reference to similar previous projects or even to other work using the same kind of method. Finally, the contribution to literacy knowledge, in the abstract, academic sense, was far stronger for the LE projects than the AL projects, as might be expected.

In terms of the broader measures, the immediate impact of projects was quite strong for the AL group, as was the general impact, suggesting that the AL projects were successful in focusing on pragmatic, concrete aspects of practice. For the LE group, the distribution of both types of impact showed up as many low, few medium, and many high. In other words, projects were divided noticeably between those with immediate practical implications and those without.

For both categories, the effects of the projects on literacy capacity were not as strong as hoped. This means that new researchers were not being brought into the literacy research field through these projects. I tried to follow up on individuals named as trainee researchers to see if they had published or been involved elsewhere, but I found little evidence that they were continuing to work in the area.

Overall, the strongest difference between the two categories was the more systematic approach of the LE projects. This could reflect greater experience in writing and conducting research among the literacy experts, and reflect the higher level of development of that research community. However, the shared elements were also quite revealing. The lack of cumulative approach and the weakness in research preparation have significant implications for the development of the literacy research community as a whole, as can be seen when the results are considered from the perspective of communities of practice.

The Current Community of Practice

Stepping back from the review and framing it within the three elements of communities of practice discussed earlier—mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire—gives rise to a number of important insights.

Mutual engagement, the sense of being involved with a group of like-minded people, is a critical aspect of a practice community for Wenger (1998). The LE projects had this to a fairly high degree—a high number of their projects were based on meetings and joint work. Comments from the less developed research groups, such as AL and francophone researchers, suggested that they saw this as a key area for development. They wanted opportunities to get together and come up with ways to create a research community that could deal with the geographical challenges of a huge country with a relatively low population. This is offset by the tendency of researchers to work in isolation on their research, even within their own organization. For example, if somebody is a practitioner during the day and working on research at night (not an unusual situation), it can be hard for them to get support.

The lack of cumulative effect across literacy research suggests that mutual engagement is not entirely inclusive, and the lack of dissemination of results is another layer to this concern. It is all too common for common interests (say, work with seniors in the Maritimes and in BC) to be well-represented in the research projects but for the researchers to have no familiarity with each other, either on the level of research reports or personally. The concern here is not duplication—the argument that research in

Victoria is an exact duplication of a project in Charlottetown is not very strong—but rather a missed opportunity for mutual learning and teaching to the benefit of all involved.

The joint enterprise among literacy researchers is enhanced by the diversity of projects funded by the NLS. Whatever the interests of a researcher, and whatever their methodological preference, they can feel as if they are taking part in the larger program. This does not imply that all researchers see the aim of the research in exactly the same way, but reflects a shared intention to conduct literacy research to improve services to learners. However, the sense of a common goal is threatened once again by the lack of a cumulative approach among the projects. By acknowledging other work in the field, researchers can show how their work fits into the bigger picture and how it serves the common goal.

Cross-referencing among Canadian researchers has been helped by the creation of anglophone and francophone databases of literacy research (www.nald.ca), which are themselves NLS-sponsored. It is also worth noting that some research approaches have been particularly favoured by NLS funding for their development, with one clear example being practitioner research. Canada has an international reputation for bringing research and practice together, largely due to the efforts of the NLS.

A shared repertoire of approaches to the work is certainly present in the Canadian literacy research community, though there is substantial diversity within the community. As well as the expected diversity in knowledge creation strategies and research method, there are also different degrees of pragmatism. Basic research on adult learning theory is quite different from conference support, for example, though both contribute significantly to the literacy community of practice and this diversity is generally to be welcomed. The common lack of systematic design in the research projects reflects an admirably open and supportive approach within the NLS program, but may have damaged its credibility. Without a clear description of method, it is difficult for users of research, such as readers of the final report, to tell how much the research applies to them or how reliable it is. Improved dissemination of research findings and a more deliberate approach to developing new researchers could be very helpful in creating a shared understanding of literacy research and what approaches are helpful in this field. Overall, the communities of practice perspective suggests that the NLS funding, with its emphasis on community development and a responsive approach to local concerns, was doing many things right.

Implications for the Development of the Literacy Research Community

In this final section, I will discuss a number of ways to apply the insights of this analysis to literacy and numeracy research in Canada, though I believe that these arguments have important implications beyond this specific field. The general implication that I would emphasize most strongly is that enhancement of research capacity must address far broader concerns than are conventionally taken into account. Social relationships matter profoundly in the conduct of research and the collective aspects of the field of endeavour influence the research that is conducted very deeply. Research is not an activity that can be managed in a top-down fashion, but is the accumulation of work by a community of scholars and practitioners (Polanyi, 1962).

The recommendations for building a research community of practice include encouraging interaction between researchers, as well as between researchers and others. This should be fairly obvious, but is frequently neglected. Even in an era of sophisticated electronic communication, little can replace face-to-face meetings, and it seems a lot easier for researchers to e-mail each other once they have met. Collaboration should be encouraged within and between organizations, as is already the case with the promotion of research networks by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. In addition, researchers could be expected to share their work more widely in person. This would mean supporting researchers to get out and talk to groups of people at conferences and other gatherings, as well as at less formal occasions. This can help to demonstrate the value of the educational research community to the general public and provide some protection against external influences. Practitioners also tend to view information they get directly from the people who actually conducted the research as extremely credible and useful (St. Clair, 2004).

It can also be important to go beyond communication and support the direct involvement of research users in research. The broad process of developing and applying research-based insights involves a community that is wider than researchers; policy-makers, educators, trainees, and funders are all part of the community of practice, and can helpfully be treated as such. This can sometimes be difficult to achieve—for example, where funders want an “objective” evaluation of a project—but can be encouraged wherever possible. This is not to suggest that these different groups are members of one broad community of practice, but that their inclusion can at least bridge across communities of practice.

Recognition of previous work is a key aspect of good research practice, not only to build a strong community of practice, but to acknowledge that educational research fits within a worldwide collective looking at similar topics. Going beyond this, however, it can be useful to step back from the immediate work to consider the nature of the wider community in which it is situated. One recent contentious demonstration of this principle in education is the imposition of research values rooted in the No Child Left Behind Act in the United States, which used funding structures as incentives (St. Clair, 2007). At times like this, it is essential to pay attention to the contours of the field rather than focus too closely on individual projects. In a similar vein, one destructive tendency in many research fields is tension between supporters of different methods of research. People tend to get attached to different research methods, with divisions often reflecting real and strongly held philosophical commitments. Nonetheless, it is important to ensure that methodological diversity flourishes in the context of mutual respect and awareness in order to support a shared repertoire of knowledge-building strategies.

Resources devoted to infrastructure, such as computers, travel, meetings, and even food, can be seen as taking away from the “real” work of research—transcribing, analysis, or other forms of data handling. However, communities of practice approaches suggest that it is just as important to provide support for people to engage with other researchers, and preferably in a variety of different situations. Infrastructure investment very often makes the research easier to conduct and allows for greater impact.

In allocating funding, senior researchers with long track records are often given the lion’s share, with a relatively small amount for new researchers. One effect of this is

to reinforce the potential conservatism of communities of practice, and it can also restrict the type of research done and the methods used. Seniority is not always the most valuable consideration, and there is a great deal to be said for speculation both in topic and method. Significant commitments to new researchers will make them more likely to stay in the field, enriching and refreshing it. In addition, researchers should be rewarded for engaging with the research community. If the benefits of educational research accrue partly to the community of practice rather than just to individual researchers or research projects, it makes sense that involvement in that community is valuable in itself. This is partly the rationale behind universities rewarding staff for service, but in many research contexts, involvement in conferences, working groups, and so on is almost treated as a reward rather than as a vital component of the work. Instead, community of practice theory suggests that this is the most important part of what we do.

These suggestions are intended to make research more collaborative, more enjoyable, and, therefore, more attractive. It may well also raise the credibility of educational research generally if there is a sense that we have a clear collective project and a tight network reflecting that aim. The recent attacks on the quality of educational research (Belzer & St. Clair, 2005) would have been far less convincing if educational researchers could have shown a coherent purpose and approach behind their work, albeit one that maintained a commitment to diversity and exploration. In concrete terms, the implications of this analysis suggest a change of emphasis not only for NLS research support, but for the way the research is conceived. To some extent, this argument is consistent with developments such as the Canadian Language & Literacy Research Network (www.cllrnet.ca). However, these networks can be seen as strongly promoting scientific models of research that just happen to be collaborative rather than setting out to build, strengthen, and expand community. Instead of social relationships being seen as an instrumental precursor of high quality conventional research, communities of practice theory suggests that these relationships are the very stuff of research. Build the social, and the knowledge will come—albeit sometimes in unconventional and unexpected forms.

Conclusion

The argument that educational research can be viewed as a community of practice should not be a surprising one. There is strong intuitive appeal to the idea that research is ultimately a collective, shared endeavour. In this discussion, I have tried to show how adopting this perspective changes the emphasis and weight of different aspects of the research endeavour. Instead of focusing efforts on raising research capacity through conventional measures, such as enhanced methodological expertise, the focus of capacity-building efforts is relationships between people.

The initial driver for any such process must be the interests that people share. Canada is, of course, a small country in terms of population, and services tend to be well-spread out. An individual working in family literacy in Flin Flon, however interested in literacy research, will potentially find it hard to build a working community with others interested in family literacy. This is especially true for new researchers who may not know how to start or who to start with. There is a need for specific conferences and other social activities, despite the expense of such meetings, and for structures such as staff exchanges between active research organizations and those just beginning.

There are dangers in a strongly social view. It is possible that an elite network will form, having a closed conversation and excluding those who do not fit, in some way, with the network's expectations. It may prove difficult to attract non-researchers, though my impression is that it is getting easier to bring people in, and that connections between researchers and others are getting stronger. In some cases, the boundary between researchers and others is becoming blurred as people dip in and out of research activity. Despite the development of the Internet and other technologies, distance does still matter, largely because distance is time and money. Both of these resources are scarce. These comments suggest that the issues facing literacy research are, at root, human and social. They will likely never be solved completely, but there are strategies that can be put in place to make them more tractable.

Research capacity is a vital contemporary issue in many settings, going far beyond conventional research institutions, such as universities. Education policy-makers seem increasingly interested in evidence-based practice, providing an important opportunity for educational researchers to affect policy and practice quite directly, but this depends on the sub-fields of education having the capacity to respond to this opportunity. Viewing research as a community of practice does not negate the need for strong and reliable resources to support research work, but it does suggest that those resources will be more effective if some proportion is dedicated to bringing researchers together with each other and with practitioners. Only by building capability and community together will literacy research in Canada thrive.

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