

Further Along the Road: The revised and expanded *Traveler's Guide to Research in Practice*

in conversation with Mary Norton

This spring The Learning Centre in Edmonton released an updated version of Mary Norton's *Traveler's Guide to Research in Practice*. Some practitioner-researchers will be intimately familiar with this resource, while others may never have heard of it. In February Tannis Atkinson, editor of *Literacies*, spoke to Mary Norton about her work on the new, expanded *Traveler's Guide*.

Tannis: My understanding is that *The Traveler's Guide* was initially produced to support the first research in practice project that happened in Alberta. Is that correct?

Mary: Actually the second one. The first project was when we produced *Learning about Participatory Approaches in Adult Literacy Education* (2000). For that project Grace Malicky taught a course for graduate credit through the University of Alberta Faculty of Education. Grace developed the research and practice part of the course and I did the participatory practices part. After that, people did research. In the next project, people did research in practice and we set up the RiPAL Network. Once again we had a course, but its focus was on research in practice, and then people did research about whatever topic they were interested in. When I taught that course I developed handouts and materials. Subsequently I put them together into a booklet, mainly because I was doing workshops and other courses where I used the handouts. Then other people started to use the booklet. In 2005, after I came back from sabbatical, there was a call for applications from what was then the NLS. I proposed to revise and update the *Guide* because there had been so many developments, and I wanted to include some of what we'd been learning, as well as some examples from the field.

Tannis: The practitioner research projects that you organized and that led to the first draft of *The Traveler's Guide* were some of the earliest formalized research in practice projects in Canada. Was part of the core training for practitioners to demystify the research process or was it that you were aware that many practitioners didn't have a lot of experience with research?

Mary: Well, probably both. And the training was also a way to maintain a connection between The Learning Centre—a community based literacy organization—and the University of Alberta. In the first research in practice project, Grace Malicky, a U of A professor, facilitated the research part of a course and I facilitated modules about participatory approaches. It was an interesting model. I had some research background, but Grace had been doing research for some time and had a real, real commitment to working with the field. So that course was an opportunity to make connections between the university and the field. The research course was also to help people learn to do research because most people who joined the project said that they didn't know how to do research. Partly because of perceptions around research, I think.

Tannis: It seems that many practitioners who are new to reflective practice or research in practice are often a bit anxious. They think that in order for it to count as research they have to start with a question and be very clear upfront about the question. Do you think that has changed at all or that the range of acceptable questions has expanded? Or that people feel more comfortable asking a broader range of questions?

Mary: Well, I think what might have changed, over almost ten years, is openness to what research might be. In the '90s, when we were starting to explore research and practice, I'd introduce workshops by asking people to talk about what "research" meant to them. Some thought of research in terms of scientific and quantitative models. And I remember some people saying, "Well, research really doesn't have anything to do with me. It's out there."

Since then, I think there's been a shift in awareness and understanding that there are other kinds of research, and there is research that may relate

to our work. One of the things I am trying to do in the *Traveler's Guide* is show where research in practice comes from, which is mainly from the qualitative area. That's not to discount quantitative or scientific research, but to recognize that it doesn't necessarily apply to research in practice. With research in practice, we're often trying to find out things that don't get answered by those quantitative kinds of questions or through experimental research; they get answered another way. I'm trying to open up discussion and awareness about the continuum of doing research. The kind of research we do really depends on what we're trying to find out, and what our resources are.

Tannis: Speaking of resources, what are the changes that you've seen in terms of the possibilities of doing research in practice? Where do you see things now as opposed to maybe five years ago or ten years ago?

Mary: Well, certainly ten years ago, the NLS was a main source of funding to do research in practice. Most of the projects I've been involved with were funded by the NLS as provincial projects, although *The Traveler's Guide* is funded as a national project. But in my reading of the guidelines for the last call for proposals, there seemed to be less room for developing proposals that might support, say, an individual program or group of people in a program to do research in practice.

Tannis: It seems to me that even since the journal has been going things have changed. When we first talked about starting the journal there was a sense that some practitioners felt pressured to do research in practice, and didn't feel support for it even though there may have been funding for projects. And now we're sort of at the opposite end, where more and more people are keen to do it [laughter] and yet there aren't resources and supports to do any kind of formal research in practice!

Mary: So we might have to rethink how we do research in practice, or think of additional approaches. In the past we were able to access funding that enabled people to have time to step out of their work or to be paid for additional time. That was great, but I wonder if it also created a model that suggests that we need do research over

an extended period of time, and spend a fair bit of time on it. It was almost like an academic model, in a way, because when you do a master's or PhD thesis you spend a lot of time doing the research work, right?

I'm just speculating right now if that model created certain expectations about what research in practice needs to be. When he was in Pennsylvania, Allan Quigley did work to set up an action research network. People integrated small action research projects into their practice and wrote reports on their projects. These are all available online. Perhaps people might find it more possible to do research as part of their practice.

Tannis: That may be one way to go. Some people have also said, "Well, what about reflective practice generally?" Sometimes we think of research in practice as only being these formal, large projects, and is that just adopting the academic model? What about making more concerted structure and time to just reflect on your practice and figure out what you do that works well, and finding some way to share what you learned?

Mary: In *Focused on Practice*¹ there's an example from Manitoba, where Margaret Chambers wrote up how her practice related to research. I think that was pretty interesting, and it shows that practitioners can be working in a research kind of way; it just doesn't always get documented. The thing about documenting, taking the work a bit further, is that sometimes we see things that we don't see when we're observing and reflecting alone.

Tannis: Right. Do you feel fairly hopeful about the future of research in practice?

Mary: Well, I tend to be very hopeful about everything! I've just finished working with a group on a project about moving the research about violence into practice. What's hopeful for me is people's excitement about doing research. It's not so much about doing research, but about the learning that comes from doing it, and I think there is a different kind of learning that can happen when we engage in research.

For instance we can go to a workshop and hear some ideas. Through the research, there are different opportunities to process and integrate. My experience with research has always been that I learn as much about myself as about my practice. And those go together, because my practice reflects who I



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¹ Jenny Horsman and Helen Woodrow (eds.), *Focused on Practice: A Framework for Adult Literacy Research in Canada* (2006). Vancouver: Literacy BC.

am, and how I am, and vice versa. I think the learning from research in practice is what I'm hopeful about.

Certainly I've heard people say they feel pressured that we have to do research. But I've also watched people come to workshops about research with no pressure and a lot of interest or curiosity. And then people take up research as much or as little as they can, right? There are different levels. Yeah, so I'm hopeful that way. And also, I know that people find ways to do things. That's not to diminish the need for funding—not by any means—but it's pretty amazing over the years what people have accomplished.

Tannis: Yeah, that's true. Literacy workers generally are fairly resilient and creative people. It sometimes seems to me that research in practice is kind of a structured way to support—or a way to think in a structured way about—one's creativity in one's practice. Supporting it and extending it and pushing it.

Mary: Well, I'm just finishing the chapter on research as a creative process! I was mulling that over as I was working on this version of *The Guide*...trying to connect the research process with the practice process. It is different. But it's not