Seeing the forest and the trees by Margerit Roger

■ "Literacy is all about change." It's such an oft-used sentiment that we can scarcely hear the full meaning behind the words. And yet it's true. Being able to read and write changes things. In fact, it changes everything. Not in the way that tires are changed, one spare for one flat, but in the way that forests grow, an endless series of subtle shifts that gradually take it from boreal to coniferous. Literacy—in the broadest sense of the word—changes people, but it also changes organizations, communities and cultures.

How then do we as literacy practitioners contribute to the ever-changing "ecosystem" in Canadian workplaces, government offices, agencies and educational institutions as we go about our work of teaching, creating programs or developing policies?

The landscape of perpetual change

Most often in the world of literacy, we hear about the changes that take place in individuals as they lay claim to their new literacy skills. Learners tell deeply moving stories about how their lives and world views have been changed by what they've learned and by having learned. Teachers witness how learners go from a polite and tentative nibble to a voracious hunger for new ideas and challenges. Sounds and letters first, perhaps, but then it's stories, information, literature, analysis. Dreams of reading books to youngsters grow into bigger dreams of finishing an education or getting a more challenging job, and slowly personal experience gets situated into a larger social context.

Literacy-induced change is not just about the learners, however. "Our inner world of concepts and ideas, images and symbols is a critical dimension of social reality" (Capra p. 73). As quickly (or slowly) as individuals expand their ability to take in and express new ideas, and then reach out for further horizons, the communities and networks around them are affected. Learners have new expectations of the world around them as a result of their developing skills. New hopes and desires arise; new points of contact are sought out. In order to put skills to use, learners travel new paths and so the web of connection between people is permanently altered, even if only to a small degree.

An individual literacy action can therefore have its own far-reaching and cumulative "butterfly effect,"

even if the original source is no longer apparent. Improved use of language (at any level of difficulty) increases self-awareness, conceptual thought and the communication of meaning. "Being able to hold mental images [also] enables us to choose among several alternatives, which is necessary to formulate values and social rules of behaviour" (Capra p. 73).

It follows then, that organizations are not immune to literacy-induced change either, even if they appear at times to be monolithic and quite impenetrable. In fact, a great deal of research has been done on the positive impacts of literacy programming on organizations, and these are often cited as the return-on-investment arguments for planting those seeds in the first place. The Conference Board of Canada, for example, has done numerous reports on the benefits of literacy-related training. Certainly, the even broader impact of literacy on health, justice, social cohesion and the economy have been well documented across North America.

The work of improving literacy is carried out by people, though. So, when we talk about organizations experiencing or supporting literacy-related change (whether it is the implementation of new support services, plain-language documentation or new programming), it is really the people within them who will either support or resist it. It is change in people that will result in change in organizations and communities.

It may be helpful then to try to learn from "the natural change processes that are embedded in all living systems" (Capra p. 100), because while the natural change processes for individuals and organizations are different because of scale, there are connections that can help us move literacy initiatives forward.

Sometimes organizations are proactive in addressing literacy needs. In these cases, someone within the organization may have envisioned the gains that could be made with improved literacy skills and has rallied others to the cause. More often, however, literacy-related actions in organizations emerge in an indirect, reactive way. In these cases, decision-makers are confronted with a significant problem that must be addressed in order for the organization to better fulfill its mandate. It might be readiness for training or safety concerns or production quality. In order to address the larger,

organizational concern, decision-makers are then compelled by the circumstances to analyze the situation and deal with those literacy needs that are perceived as barriers to achieving the larger goals.

Either way, however, the organization (workplace, educational institution or community group) must become a "learning entity" itself, as people within it slowly shift their views and ways. New information must be given time to take root and new paths forged. And just as individuals struggle and go through transformations as they expand their horizons with newly learned skills, organizations must wrestle with barriers and fears and determine the most effective way to maintain equilibrium while seeking out new contacts and opportunities. What evolves through the grappling and ongoing integration of small changes is an altered "ecosystem" composed of the individuals, their organization and its associated connections.

Seeing organizations and communities as living systems capable of and subject to gradual, emergent change is quite different than using the mechanistic metaphor of classical management theory in which organizational change is structured and often imposed and abrupt. It certainly shifts the role of decision-makers to something more akin to "foresters" than mechanics. And if language plays a vital role in how we view and interact with these systems, i.e., if "living social systems...are self-generating networks of communications" (de Geus p. 82) shaped by our understanding of the world—which is in turn based on the information we can access—then the role of people working with literacy issues is even more critical. To choose examples from two ends of the continuum: helping someone to read creates opportunities for new social networks for that individual; creating new networks changes what may be generated by our organizations or social system.

Individuals and systems...individuals in systems

This connection between individual and organizational change, and even social change, means that planners of literacy programming work in several directions at once. They face the learner, while at the same time facing the systems and structures of the organizations and communities in which they operate. For example, literacy practitioners create environments in which learners can thrive, while at the same time trying to clear the

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Natural change, inherent in all living systems, can teach us about moving literacy initiatives forward.

organization or system's "underbrush" so that the learner's path becomes easier. They may even attempt to initiate systemic changes because they are able to see more effective connections between individuals and organizations. For example, hiring or entrance criteria are often based strictly on academic credentials, which creates barriers to some individuals and ultimately affects the workforce or economy. A more holistic process suggested by someone with an understanding of literacy-related inequities might include recognition for prior learning, to acknowledge the fact that people can acquire skills and knowledge outside educational institutions.

Of course, these types of systemic changes require individuals in positions of authority to challenge their own assumptions and beliefs, potentially requiring a change of mind *and* heart. Systemic changes can create new currencies that previously marginalized people can use to participate in employment, education or social networks. What was not valued before may now have some clout. And although organizations are composed of people, organizations are also larger than the sum of their parts. They are the products of their own histories and manifestations of their own culture, as much as they are subject to the vagaries of the external forces acting on them. Often, activities have been carried out a particular way for so long that it's no longer clear why. There may not be an organizational (individual) willingness to redefine existing currencies. In fact, processes and underlying assumptions can become so entrenched as fundamental elements of an organization or community's identity that they are for all intents and purposes invisible, and therefore (not necessarily intentionally) removed from analysis or scrutiny.

Change has a way of exposing entrenched processes and underlying assumptions, however. And if literacy work is all about change, then we can expect the exposure of some of those hidden assumptions through our work—both in individuals and in organizations. As Vaclac Havel states,

Processes and assumptions can be so entrenched that they are all but invisible.

"education is the ability to understand in a deeper and concealed way the connection of phenomena." Tangles of outdated notions and practices come to light. Inequities and inconsistencies become apparent. An example is the notion that tradespeople are "good with their hands" and therefore less "good at school." The implicit statement is that one form of skill is more valuable than another, and that the complexities of trades-related literacy are not related to what goes on in a school. Another example is the notion that standardized testing is an accurate reflection of an individual's "literacy" levels, regardless of cultural and socio-economic context or occupational experiences.

We may find that these "ersatz truths" are at the root of some of the barriers and resistance we experience as we try to bring about literacy-related change, whether in individuals, in organizations or in society at large. Once identified, however, it becomes possible to pull them into the foreground for discussion. Why is something done a certain way? What are the underlying assumptions? What are the consequences if we do something different, and what outcomes do we want to avoid? "Clearing the path" in an organization or community may therefore require the literacy program planner to look at the larger ecosystem in which the literacy issues have grown, to use the metaphor of the natural world, and to contribute to a shift in thinking about existing practices and policies.

Helping learners to read and write is one thing; helping evolving systems is another. Literacy practitioners are familiar with the hard advocacy work on behalf of individuals, yet it can be daunting to address broader inequities that arise, especially if a critical mass of support has not yet been established. Besides, shifts in organizational thinking require resources and commitment when they are taking place on a large scale. As a result, organizations and communities actively involved in literacy initiatives will at times struggle, hit plateaus and resist. The people within them may reach a point of change-fatigue, when the need for the familiar becomes greater than the need for progress.

Sowing the seeds of change

At that point, just as when helping an individual expand his or her literacy skills, small steps can be most effective. The gradual, "natural process" of change that takes place in an ecosystem, with its feedback loops and checks and balances becomes informative. Without waiting for a fire to raze large sections of the forest, new growth can be initiated in places where there is room and adequate light. In other words, when change is incremental, not a process of rupture and imposed replacement, and when people are gradually brought together to achieve a shared goal, it is more likely that literacy-related improvements in personal and public realms will be sustainable.

We can learn something here from Jane Jacobs, the well-known urbanist and activist. In her books *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* and *The Nature of Economies*, she uses a systems perspective to support her belief in "the value of exchange between strangers" (Johnson p. 97). Influenced by her observations about ecosystems, she described healthy change in cities and economies as an organic process fuelled in part by the power of in-person contact. Contact between people in their daily lives makes possible the (planned or unplanned) flow of information and ideas and allows new businesses and markets to emerge. This process of continual emergence allows for change that incorporates factors both internal and external to the system, while maintaining critical connections between component parts. Jacobs argued that freeways decrease contact and disrupt creative emergence. Sidewalks, on the other hand, cause people to stop and interact, allowing ideas to circulate and shift. The lesson for literacy work is to continue to nurture connections at a human level, between individuals and throughout an organization, to listen and integrate, and then to move forward from a place of shared ideas that respects both the old and the new. Again, it is change in individuals that makes change in organizations possible.

And because so much of literacy work on both the micro and the macro levels is a combination of an intellectual and an emotional process, a matter of changing hearts and minds, it seems important to recognize our catalytic roles as literacy facilitators in this larger sense. We need to accept that in the world of literacy, we are contributing to "the process of...working toward more just and humane forms of social organization" (Foley p. 85) as much as we are helping someone learn to read. Whatever we do affects both the forest and the trees.

We build pathways for learners, but we can also pave the way for "sidewalk" exchanges between people inside and outside the world of literacy. We introduce literacy into related discussions and we bring people onto projects to experience literacy work in action. We raise policy and process issues, and we gently but consistently challenge outdated misconceptions. Slowly, we begin to expand the parameters of what is valued by introducing other facts and the primacy of first-hand experience, so that new people come to understand and believe in our work at a deeper level. People who were formerly reticent may become champions. Projects that needed considerable pushing can take root and begin to grow. Organizations that hesitantly made a first step to invest in literacy may decide to plan for expansion. In time, the larger landscape is changed.

Engaging others in conversations and projects thus becomes an act of community-building, a chance to improve literacy about literacy. This engagement of new people and energies also feeds the eternal hopefulness of literacy work. Through a series of what may seem like tiny steps, a sprinkling of heart-and-mind conversions, and small projects that take root and spread, we can see the cumulative impact on individuals, as well as on organizations and communities. And we continue to experience and demonstrate literacy work as a social practice that helps us all to better read the world as it is and how it could be. ∎

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