

Laughter breaking out of brackets: A reflective practitioner research project about story and diversity

by Sheila Stewart

Since September 2007, a Toronto-based research team has been meeting monthly to reflect on practice and on ourselves as practitioners through the lens of story and diversity. The group includes practitioner-researchers from two community-based programs—Mary Brehaut, Andy Noel and Nadine Sookermany from Parkdale Project Read, and Sally Gaikzheyongai and Michele Kuhlmann from Davenport Perth Neighbourhood Centre—along with Tannis Atkinson (Literacies), Guy Ewing (Festival of Literacies/OISE/UT), Maria Moriarty (AlphaPlus Resource Centre) and myself. The team includes seven women and two men, ranging in age from their late 30s to early 60s. One researcher is Anishnawbe, two are of Caribbean background and six are white. Only three are Canadian-born. Collectively, we have more than 200 years of experience in adult literacy work: one of us entered the field four years ago, several have been involved for close to 25 years and the rest have spent close to a decade in the field. All of us try to be aware of what we can do to challenge discrimination and inequality.

Officially called “The Uses of Narrative in Adult Literacy Teaching and Learning,” this project is funded by the Research and Knowledge Mobilization Office of the Canadian Council on Learning. In this article I begin to share some of our process and findings. A full report of the project will be available by the end of 2008.

After teaching high school in Libya and adult ESL at a refugee settlement in Swaziland, she returned to Canada. She realized that she didn't want to be a teacher at a Canadian school and had many questions about international development work. She applied to a literacy program in the big city of Toronto. She told them she was good at making do with whatever she had and juggling lots of tasks. They hired her. The program was in a small room in the basement of the library...it had been a cloakroom. Her first evening, she could go home only after she woke a homeless man who was sleeping in the corner to tell him it was time to leave.

She was now part of a staff collective of four white people in 1989 working primarily with students of colour. Most of the tutors and other volunteers were also white women: librarians, journalists, lawyers, other professionals, retired teachers and people trying to get into a bachelor of education program. On her second day, one of the board members came in to see who had been hired. After she left, another staff person said: “We had wanted to hire a person of colour, but we hired you instead.” The board member was black and had said something about white, middle-class do-gooders who go off to other parts of the world to “help people.” She knew this was one way to describe herself.

After her daughters were born, she found herself running from work to home, hoping she was doing some

good somewhere. She would try to get the program closed on time at night so she could get home in time to read to her children. She ran from meeting to meeting. She liked some of her work and tried not to think about some of it, and she worried about the students. People talked to her all day. Their stories rattled about in her psyche, gathering in knots across the top of her shoulders.

A story needs a beginning and an end,
but literacy work and
why we want to do this work
and why we stick with it
even when the pay and hours are lousy
and the space to be creative is shrinking
doesn't have a beginning and end.
How can we make our teaching nourishing
for students and ourselves?

Writing about that experience in literacy work was one way to begin the story of this research project on story and diversity. As a research team, we did the same thing, writing reflective stories about our own family histories. Culture and class are entwined with our relationship with school and learning and what brought us to literacy work. We are curious about the paths that have brought us and you to literacy work.

There is power in stories, spoken and written.
When do we feel our own power
as literacy workers?
How do we make best use of our energy
and knowledge?

This research project is about the possibilities and limitations of stories in adult literacy teaching and learning. It is about literacy practitioners' stories and the ways we listen and hear each other's and our learners' stories. We have long known literacy learners' stories are at the heart of literacy. Our own stories of creativity, resilience and exhaustion, our ability to hear learners' stories and each other's, are likewise entwined with literacy practice.

Stories and stances can bog us down. We hear through our own stories; the prism through which we apprehend includes our schooling, learning, trauma, creativity, culture, gender and much more. How do we hear in the moment, given the vast array of social differences and life experience in a literacy program?

What happens when a story has
a single protagonist?
Do we need a hero and journey, obstacles
and redemption?
What is the relationship between our own
literacy story and our collective stories?

This project grew out of a commitment to anti-discrimination work and concern about its near absence in the literacy field. In the early 1990s, there were workshops in Toronto on anti-racism in literacy work and the provincial department responsible for literacy included a staff person who talked to literacy staff about disability and literacy. Later that decade, as program reform impacted on the field, increasing accountability measures, practitioners spent more and more time keeping statistics. With these changes, discussions of differences and discrimination—and how to understand these issues in literacy work—found very few avenues of exploration. This research project aims to bring this discussion to the fore and shed some light on the complex intersection of diversity issues, story and listening.

What do we love and hate about literacy work?
How do different kinds of literacy stories
collide and intersect
and sometimes make us feel crazy?

As a research group, we started telling each other stories about times when things weren't right in our work, reflecting on moments of discomfort, often related to all the differences at play between students and ourselves. What had happened that concerned us? What are the layers of the experience? Some of us told of not knowing where our job began or ended, some of having to hold up our program alone when things were rough. Sometimes we learned a lot from students who told us that our experience was different from theirs and we shouldn't assume things were the same for them. We talked about what we hid from students, such as sexual orientation or spiritual practice, and about the effects of this hiding on ourselves, students and the program. We reflected long and hard about whether we had done the right thing in our encounters with students and how we might do things differently. We noticed how our stories impact on how we hear and respond to students.

**Guy Ewing and Andy Noel
sharing laughter.**



TAVNIS ATKINSON

All her good intentions had flattened her against a wall. Literacy work made her very tired. Students' stories rained down upon her shoulders, pinned her into a corner. There was never enough time. How could she help them? She had stuffed her own story far into her back pocket, all the better to ignore it. She was professional, teacher, Miss.

There were moments of practice that stuck with us like knots in the backs of our necks, stitches in our sides, which we didn't touch. We took our time telling each other these stories, providing the details of the context, and not interrupting each other. We cycled back to our stories when we met the next month, realizing we had left out key parts. We had more to tell, the underside, back story of meeting students and tutors and going to meetings and conferences. Now that we had a group to tell, we seemed to notice things differently.

I have been trying to call our meetings research, but I don't call the group's stories data. A couple months ago I said, "Now we are at a new phase of the project—analysis" and the group laughed. We have taped all our meetings and the transcriber typed laughter in brackets. (Laughter!) Sometimes the transcript says: (a lot of joking around which I'll skip over). Some of our earlier meetings didn't have as much laughter. We would talk and sigh and take a break.

As well as talking with each other, we talk to ourselves between meetings. Some of us write in journals, some write emails, some record spoken thoughts. When we meet, we pause to gather ourselves before we talk, going to a quiet corner with our journals or coloured pencils and paper for drawing, and a cup of tea. When we have this time with our own thoughts, our conversation drops to a deeper place.

We open and close our meetings with movement and gratitude to mark the space and time together as important. These simple rituals help to affirm the research project as a valuable container for gathering thoughts and feelings. We try to be present and honest. Tannis and I plan the meetings so that we bring as much of ourselves—emotions, body, spirit and

mind—as possible to our meetings and so we can have some fun. Meeting on a Friday afternoon after a full week of work, our meetings need to help our work and lives by being part of our own search for meaning, rather than serving a research project's

agenda. The research project grew with who was in the group. We built trust as we went. Some of us had known each other for years. Others met only recently, and we have worked to create a group climate that allows everyone to contribute as a researcher.

One of the researchers had asked if we were extracting stories from students. Another talked about how he used to like to get the stories using the language experience approach to make them into text. Now I feel I don't want the students' stories laid out for me, I don't want to feel I know their stories. Nothing is that simple. The students are much more than what they tell about their lives, just as the practitioners are. Learning is part of a slower

unfolding of story, the students' and our own.

During this project, I started teaching a group of students two mornings a week. One week, between classes, I met one of the other researchers to talk about the project. I talked about what was happening with my students, what had happened the day before and whether I might be facilitating the class differently because of the research. The next day it seemed easier and a bit lighter in class, as if my shoulders had settled back into themselves. The students were still anxious about going on to college, and I still felt the tension of creating time for discussion while meeting the demands of the college preparation curriculum, but I found myself telling them a bit more about myself. Might I be holding their stories that bit lighter?

How do stories unfold in the telling, in the relationships we build with students and each other? What new ways of telling and listening might better support learning for students and practitioners?



Sally Gaikezhongai and Michele Kuhlman using art to reflect.

As literacy practitioners, we are often good listeners, but we can also tire of listening and we are always strapped for time. We teach tutors about active listening, but how often do we get the chance to do it with each other and to question what it is? Our group began to talk about deep listening and also asked, what is "difference?" We are more than the categories we put each other into, just as students are more than the labels

Sharing our process

In the midst of our process, we offered a number of different workshops to further explore and share what we were learning. These workshops gave participants a taste of the kind of reflective practice we had been doing. We used simple arts-based activities such as drawing or choosing objects from a table of objects to prompt reflection.

For one workshop, at the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education (CASAE) conference in Vancouver in May, we hung words from different lengths of wool in the doorframe. Participants walked through these words to enter the room:

*listening spirit trust mind body space
diversity emotions difference connection
history presence trauma relationship
research container*

And we posted the following questions on the walls:

*What happens to your story in your literacy practice?
How does who you are affect how you listen?
What can help us learn from our moments of
discomfort with difference?
How do we support each other to reflect?*

At all of the workshops we invited practitioners to reflect on moments of discomfort where social differences were at play. I invite you to do the same. There may be many such moments, but it is helpful to settle on one. It might have happened years ago or this week. Choosing an object and drawing or free-writing can allow you to approach the moment with openness and a feeling of space.

In our hectic work of teaching and coordinating programs, many complex things happen that we have little time to examine. We usually move quickly to the next task. We may not want to reflect on what occurred, particularly if we feel shame or confusion and we may not share our reflections with a trusted colleague, if we have one. These moments of discomfort can be profound sources of learning, if we approach them with care and without judgement.

society often imposes upon them. We don't want to minimize the ways difference works, as it can create privilege and an unfettered sense of entitlement. But each person is different from another. If we assume difference, can we imagine new ways to respect it? Why do we use the word "across" and talk about "across difference"?

In the group, our stories ricochet off each other, creating new openings. In the web of stories we tell about our practice, we strengthen our ability to be present to each other and ourselves. Literacy may be less about social change and getting the learner to change and more about being present, thickening our own stories, examining them so that we are less prone to trip over them. Literacy learning is entwined with both social change and personal growth. As practitioners, our ability to be present to others and ourselves in the ever-changing play of power and difference strengthens our ability to stand up strongly, holding on to values of respect and supporting ourselves and others to be agents of change.

She was longing for the first day of school, a place to go that would make her feel important. She learned shame, obedience, to escape into books as if they could save her.

He was beaten his first week at school.

They had a one-room schoolhouse at the far end of town.

Research is finding new words for the work we do, and as we find the words, the work changes. We are finding our research-in-practice path in fits and starts, trying to make it useful. Literacy-worker knowledge is built on the agility of creating a learning space when we don't know which students will show up, the tenor of their stories or the impact of our stories on each other.

This is one story mid-project. We are currently reading transcripts and discussing what we have learned. At our last meeting, our laughter wasn't polite or in brackets. It was belly laughter, which we needed. In this article, I've played with point of view. Our tellings, like ourselves, are multiple: I, she, we, they. There will be more stories: ours and yours. Told with care, these stories open space, invite learning. ■

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