

Discussion Paper # 3

Locus of Control

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As I've taught Learners in adult basic education and literacy programs and talked with teachers and practitioners, I've come to understand that one of the most valuable things literacy practitioners do is help Learners to believe in themselves. Psychologists call this "establishing an inner locus of control". People with an **inner** locus of control believe that the outcome of the things they do depend on what they do. People with an **outer** locus of control, on the other hand, believe that it does not really matter what they do; the outcome of their actions depend on "events outside [their] personal control". (Zimbardo, 1985, p. 275)¹

How do people develop an internal or external locus of control? Here is a common understanding:

*...the development of locus of control stems from family, culture, and past experiences leading to rewards. Most internals...come from families that focused on effort, education, and responsibility. On the other hand, most externals come from families of a low socioeconomic status where there is a lack of life control.*²

I do not like to see this as 'blaming the victim.' Rather, "*developing an external locus of control is an adaptive response*" to living in "*prolonged circumstances without control*".³ Some research has shown that people are more likely to develop an internal locus of control if they live in a family environment "*characterized by warmth, protection, and nurturance*".⁴ So it is not at all surprising that people who have survived violence or trauma, or who are living with it now, may have an external locus of control.

It has been my experience that literacy programs become surrogate families and communities for many Learners. In fact, in a workshop that I did at the alternative school at the Odawa Friendship Centre, I encouraged people to share how their nuclear, extended or surrogate families played a role in helping them to develop the various types of literacies that are presented in the Rainbow/Holistic Approach to (Aboriginal) Literacy. In this discussion many people spoke about the supportive environment offered by the program. Many Learners said they felt that the program was a surrogate family or community.

¹ Neill, James (2006). *What is Locus of Control?* Retrieved from <http://www.wilderdom.com/psychology/loc/LocusOfControlWhatIs.html> November 16, 2006

² *Locus of Control*. Retrieved http://wik.ed.uiuc.edu/index.php.Locus_of_control November 16, 2006

³ Neill.

⁴ Gackenbach, Jayne, Sylvia Coutre, and Singing Woman. *Locus of Control: Two Central Alberta Cree Perspectives*. Retrieved from <http://www.sawka.com/spiritwatch/locusof.htm> November 6, 2006

Think about how the literacy environment characterizes warmth, protection, and nurturance.

Why is this important?

Learners want to shift to an inner locus of control, and can. I believe that's why they exhibit some of the behaviours that they do. For example, one day I was giving a workshop in the reception area of a community centre. Staff and visitors to the centre were accustomed to using this area to relax during breaks. The door kept opening as people tried to come in, but they quickly closed it again when they realized that there was a workshop in progress. One Learner at the workshop slammed out of the room. As she left she commented that she could not concentrate with all the interruptions. She came back. Not only did she stay, she made a phenomenal oral presentation on how she had learned to control her anger, and how she had taught her nephews to do the same. While nobody commented on her departure and return, we sure gave her lots of positive reinforcement about her presentation.

In an article on locus of control and education, Mandy Grantz points to Canadian research that says that "...given the types of life experiences that many people in ABE programs have had, it is likely many have adopted an external locus of control".⁵ Grantz is referring to research outlined in Maurice Taylor's paper, Locus of Control and Completion in an Adult Retraining Program, which found that those who completed the program "*were more internally controlled...than those who did not complete the program.*"⁶ How did the locus of control make a difference?

*Those who completed the course were more able to overcome various problems such as transportation and conflicting work schedules. They were also more likely to have started the course as a result of their own decision rather than being referred to the program by a social service agency.*⁷

She goes on to say that programs might be able to "*counsel external students in increasing their feelings of self-efficacy, thereby raising the chances that they will complete the program.*"⁸

How does counselling play a role in developing or enhancing an inner locus of control for Learners in your program?

⁵ Grantz, Mandy. *Do You Have the Power to Succeed? Locus of control and its impact on education.* Retrieved from <http://www.units.muohio.edu/psybersite/control/education.shtml> November 16, 2006

⁶ Taylor, Maurice (1985). Locus of Control and Completion in an Adult Retraining Program. *Proceedings of the 4th Annual Conference of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education, Montreal, Quebec (1985)* Retrieved from <http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/report4/rep31-35/REP33-01.HTM> November 16, 2006

⁷ Grantz.

⁸ Grantz.

Shifting the locus of control

In my experience, many Learners come to our doors with an outer locus of control. This is particularly true if they've experienced violence or trauma. How can we help Learners develop an inner locus of control? I have always hoped that the Learners measure their success by the qualitative changes they see in their lives, in addition to the quantitative changes that others use to measure success. I think this approach is becoming more widespread.

In 1998 I worked with the Ontario Native Literacy Coalition (ONLC) to undertake an in-depth study of practitioners. This work was a response to the Ontario government's first draft of a matrix for measuring progress in adult literacy in this province. Their matrix stated that every Learner's progress was to be measured in two domains – communications and numeracy. The markers of success and transition in each domain were mainly cognitive.

The ONLC's consultations with practitioners revealed that many qualitative outcomes were instrumental in helping Learners to achieve the cognitive outcomes. In many cases, these qualitative changes needed to be accomplished first, as they provided the foundation for achieving the cognitive outcomes. The qualitative outcomes and cognitive outcomes fed into each other, and formed an ongoing cycle. As the qualitative outcomes were established, the cognitive outcomes could be reached. As the cognitive outcomes were reached, the qualitative outcomes were enhanced and solidified.

The Ontario government's response to this input was to create a third domain. The matrix was opened up to include a third domain: Self-Management and Self-Direction. The main outcome for this domain was that Learners "Become a Self-Directed Learner Capable of Achieving the Best Results Possible in Work and Personal Life." The Native literacy field viewed this new domain as a move forward. I was pleased to see that the domain included a focus on "self". I saw self-management and self-direction as being part of the continuum of developing an inner locus of control.

The Ontario Literacy Coalition has since done research to enhance this domain. One of their major reports on this research, Supporting Learning, Supporting Change, A Research Project on Self-Management and Self-Direction, states:

*One strong message came out of the interviews and literature review: **self-direction is critical to the learning process.** Learners, practitioners, and teachers, academics, and employers all seem to agree on the importance of this link.⁹*

⁹ Grieve, Katrina (2003). *Supporting Learning, Supporting Change: A Research Report on Self-Management and Self-Direction*. Toronto: Ontario Literacy Coalition (p. 5).

The report goes on to discuss the forces that impact on learning. It says that we need to consider the external, “*the people, situations and conditions that support us in learning*” and that Learners’ progress can be boosted when they can “[*build*] on these supports.” The report also emphasizes the importance of internal factors:

*We can look at our attitudes towards ourselves and towards learning. We can talk about negative messages we often give ourselves, and how we sometimes sabotage our own efforts. We can explore how to give ourselves more positive messages. Similarly, we can look at how our actions either support learning or create further barriers to learning.*¹⁰

How does recognizing and nurturing the Spirit, Heart, Mind and Body of Learners affect locus of control?

What role does Hope play in locus of control?

Where is your locus of control?

Here is what Diane Howard found when she looked at things that help women Learners:

*Educational theorists, as well as being concerned about the issue of locus of control and its effect on achievement, especially in females, have been concerned about the issue of role modelling and its effect on achievement for females. Studies of students and teachers in the United States, Canada, England, and Nigeria present evidence of a positive relationship between same-sex role modelling and academic achievement.*¹¹

**How do you model an inner or outer locus of control to Learners?
Who else is modelling internal and external loci of control?**

How can your program incorporate modelling into activities with Learners?

¹⁰ Grieve, page 32.

¹¹ Howard, Diane Elizabeth (1997). *The Relationship of Internal Locus of Control and Female Role Models in Female College Students*. Retrieved from <http://www.dianehoward.com/Dissertation.htm> November 16, 2006

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