

## **Discussion Paper # 5**

### **The Successes and Impacts of Literacy Programming**

Ningwakwe

I have never heard Learners say that they enrolled in a literacy program so that their country can compete in a global economy. Rather, I've heard them say that they enrolled because they wanted to make changes in their lives. Those changes may have been for themselves or their families. Sometimes they needed to make those changes to overcome the impacts of violence or trauma.

I continue to be in awe of some of roles that Learners take on as they move towards an inner locus of control, find their voice, and put that into action. Each year, as I participate in Literacy Action Day, I meet Learners from across the country who have made those changes. A few months ago, I had breakfast with a Learner who was invited to make a presentation at a community function. The person who was scheduled to present with him could not come, so he thought of his daughter. He spoke to her school and arranged for her to miss classes for the morning, so that she could do the presentation with her father. I was very touched by the picture of a father and daughter planning a presentation together, and then doing it. What an impact that would have on the people at the presentation! What a memory for father, daughter, and the rest of the family! We can only imagine how that would affect each of them for the rest of their lives.

**Think of a time when a Learner took on a task that they would not have even considered before they entered the program.**

**What skills or gains did the Learner exhibit?**

**How did that impact him/her?**

**What impact did that have on the family or community?**

**Who else was impacted by it? How?**

#### **Learners as role models**

Each year, Canada Post and the Council of Federation present literacy awards to people in literacy, including Learners. These winners become important role models for others. However, Learners do not have to win formal recognition or awards to have an impact on others. The first Learner that comes to mind for me is the one who coordinates the very program that she came through as a Learner. She is teaching others about a positive cultural identity, which was the foundation for her to become literate and go on to college where she made the Dean's List. She has since become Vice-President of the Board of a national literacy organization, and meets annually with Senators and Members of Parliament to educate them about the impacts of literacy programming. She came from a past full of violence and trauma, and knows firsthand the feelings that Learners go

through as they seek to make changes in their lives. In all of these roles, she has a tremendous impact on people – from the Learners in the program, to Senators and Members of Parliament.

**Think of a Learner in your program who is well on his/her way to accomplishing his/her goals.  
Who is affected by that? How?**

### **Programs make a difference**

It's not just individual Learners who are making a difference. I've experienced programs participating in, or organizing, community functions. One program that comes to mind participated in the annual snow-sculpting contest in the community, often either winning or placing in the competition. Another put together a play which they then performed for the community. Still another in a women's correctional institution has written stories for their families. I often read a story from this collection when I am doing presentations on literacy. After hearing these stories, a woman in one literacy program decided that she wants to look into getting her stories published. She wants to highlight the changes she made, moving from being abused by the system to taking more control of her life.

**Think of a program that has participated in or organized a community function.  
What skills or attitudes did they exhibit?  
Who was impacted by that? How?**

### **Goals based on real life**

Learners and programs do more than just the visible work. Some go on just quietly making progress in ways that are not noticeable at first. I think these kinds of changes are encapsulated well in *Equipped For the Future* (EFF), which was developed by the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) in Washington, D.C. They used the input of 1500 adult students participating in 149 adult programs on to come up with a list of the “*knowledge and skills they would need to perform effectively according to their definition...<sup>1</sup>*” Two of the groups they consulted were on Native American reservations.

When the Learners' responses were analyzed, strong patterns emerged. The researchers saw “*a common set of customer-driven goals for adult literacy and lifelong learning that are grounded in a set of contexts that reflect how adults see their roles as parents, citizens and workers*”. These roles and responsibilities are as a citizen or community

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<sup>1</sup> *Equipped for the Future: A Customer-Driven Vision for Adult Literacy and Lifelong Learning* (1995). Washington, D.C.: National Institute for Literacy.

member, as a parent or family member and as a worker. Here are the components of the skills needed for each role:

#### Citizen and Community Member Role

*Effective citizens and community members take informed action to make a positive difference in their lives, communities and world by*

- Becoming and staying informed
- Forming and expressing opinions and ideas
- Working together
- Taking action to strengthen communities

#### Parent and Family Role

*Effective family members contribute to building and maintaining a strong family system that promotes growth and development by*

- Promoting family members' growth and development
- Meeting family needs and responsibilities
- Strengthening the family system y

#### Worker Role

*Effective workers adapt to change and actively participate in meeting the demands of a changing workplace in a changing world by*

- Doing the work
- Working with others
- Working within the big picture
- Planning and directing personal and professional growth

**Think of a Learner who is making progress in any of these areas.**

**What helped him/her do that?**

**Who is impacted by it?**

## **Personal growth**

What happens in literacy programs is so much more than reading and writing. Some people use the term “non-academic outcomes” to talk about all of the other changes practitioners help support. I am grateful to Tracy Westell, whose literature search about non-academic outcomes states:

*Perhaps all of the non-academic outcomes boil down to this term: personal growth...it does describe learners' process of learning about their relationships to their inner and outer worlds and their changing awareness, behaviour and lives as a result of that learning...positive identity formation is crucial to our ability to see*

*ourselves as learners...these studies point out that personal growth is inextricably woven into the learning that occurs in literacy programs.*<sup>2</sup>

Here are a couple of gems from Westell’s work that I plan to use in grant applications and reports to funders:

- “...improvement in students’ sense of self-efficacy or metacognitive skills could be considered legitimate secondary outcomes, joining such criteria as registering to vote, reading to one’s children, and getting off welfare.” (page 13)
- “We start out by making the important measurable, and end up making only the measurable important. (William)” (page 18)
- “The literature review is clear that self-confidence, independence and agency are essential parts of being successful at learning.” (page 26)

Westell cites a few ways programs measured non-academic outcomes. One that could be useful to our work is the “Documenting Outcomes for Learners and Their Communities: Inputs to Impacts Grid”, from *Focus on Basics*, Volume 3, Issue C (September 1999) and available online at <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=356>. I like the grid’s focus on the student and the qualitative outcomes included in the impacts section, such as “changed self-concept”.

Guy Ewing developed a grid for an unpublished discussion paper, “Impact Accountability”, in which he argues that programs need “a list of impacts that includes learning outcomes and other end states, but which also includes other more dynamic impacts.” Here are examples of what could be included in this kind of list:

impacts on learners	indicators	examples
impacts on self-confidence	reporting by learners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• learner no longer afraid to meet with child’s teacher</li> <li>• phoning the gas company about an error on the bill</li> </ul>
increasing self-awareness	reporting by learner along with tutor/facilitator/ instructor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• identifying a previous barrier to learning and developing strategies to work around it</li> </ul>
impacts on knowledge	reporting by learner along with tutor/facilitator/ instructor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• learning how WSIB works</li> <li>• learning how to obtain health information</li> </ul>

<sup>2</sup> Westell, Tracy (2005). *Measuring Non-Academic Outcomes in Adult Literacy Programs: A Literature Review*, p. 26. Available online at <http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/measuring/cover.htm>

Another model for measuring non-academic outcomes is included in Janice Brant's book, *The Aboriginal Literacy Curriculum Toolbox, Cultural Philosophy, Curriculum Design, & Strategies for Self-Directed Learning*. While Brant wrote this book for people working with Aboriginal Learners, she encourages practitioners to

*...explore techniques and approaches to inclusive and collaborative [Aboriginal] literacy learning and curriculum delivery that engages learners in self-directed practices. Self-directed practices include empowering skills such as critical thinking and self-reflection, self-esteem, communication, problem-solving, decision-making, creative thinking, collaboration, and information gathering.*<sup>3</sup>

The book also includes “*ideas for increasing the participation of individuals, techniques to help build group cohesion, guide-lines for designing culture based curriculum, and evaluation techniques to assess skill development and personal growth.*”<sup>4</sup> I believe that many of the principles and activities are transferable to a non-Aboriginal context.

**Do you know of other models?**

**Based on your experience, would you add anything else that should be included?**

## **The instructor's role**

What can practitioners do to help make all this happen? A study by practitioners in British Columbia considered just this question. Their report, *Hardwired for Hope: Effective ABE/Literacy Instructors*, lists the common threads that the researchers found. I have lifted and encapsulated these themes to stimulate reflection on the practitioner's role. They found that effective literacy and ABE instructors:

- Teach the Whole Person by
  - ✓ developing self-esteem and a sense of self-worth
  - ✓ communicating effectively with students
  - ✓ reaching out to students
  - ✓ guiding classroom discussion
  - ✓ involving students in their learning
  - ✓ providing supportive evaluation
  - ✓ providing learning options
  - ✓ providing personal student support

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<sup>3</sup> Brant, Janice (2006) *The Aboriginal Literacy Curriculum Toolbox, Cultural Philosophy, Curriculum Design, & Strategies for Self-Directed Learning*. Owen Sound, ON: Ningwakwe Learning Press, p. ix. Available from Ningwakwe Learning Press 1-888-551-9757, or [www.ningwakwe.on.ca](http://www.ningwakwe.on.ca).

<sup>4</sup> Brant, p. ix.

- Reflect on Their Teaching including
  - ✓ their delivery styles
  - ✓ their teaching philosophy
  - ✓ classroom interaction
  - ✓ student feedback
  - ✓ their role as facilitator
  
- Create an Effective Physical and Emotional Classroom Environment by
  - ✓ adjusting the physical environment
  - ✓ paying attention to the emotional environment – supporting students taking risks, helping students have fun
  
- Balance the Job by
  - ✓ community networking
  - ✓ institutional responsibilities
  - ✓ recruiting students
  - ✓ developing courses
  - ✓ supporting students in crisis<sup>5</sup>;

**Think about yourself as a practitioner.**

**How do you address these areas in your work with Learners?**

### **Working with the whole person**

Now I want to go back to something I introduced in the first discussion paper – the idea of working with the whole person. Here is what I said in that discussion paper:

*What do we mean by the whole person? I love sharing the Medicine Wheel model in my workshops with Learners. Essentially, the Medicine Wheel recognizes that we have four component parts – Spirit, Heart, Mind and Body. I believe that we must recognize and nurture all four parts of ourselves in all aspects of our lives; that is, do our utmost to lead lives of balance.*

When help Learners to recognize and nurture all four parts of themselves, we assist them to start out on the path of becoming all that they can be. Now that you've reflected on all of the discussion papers, what do you now see as possible learning outcomes in each of the four categories?

Spirit – an attitude or insight (What my intuition tells me);

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<sup>5</sup> Battell, Evelyn, Leora Gesser, Judy Rose, Jan Sawyer and Diana Twiss (2004). *Hardwired for Hope: Effective ABE/Literacy Instructors*. Nanaimo, BC: Malaspina University-College, p. 132. Available online at <http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/hwired/cover.htm>

Heart – a feeling about self or others (What I feel);  
Mind – knowledge (What I Know);  
Body – skills (What I can Do, or What I have done)<sup>6</sup>.

**Think about what role you or your organization has played in helping these outcomes to take shape and to blossom.  
What has been the impact when you have included all four?**

## **REFERENCES**

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<sup>6</sup> Hill, Diane (1995). *Aboriginal Access to Post-Secondary Education, Prior Learning Assessment and its use within Aboriginal Programs of Learning*. Deseronto and Belleville, ON: First Nations Technical Institute and Loyalist College.