

An Evaluation Report

# Building research capacity in the adult literacy field in Ontario

---

An evaluation of the activities of the  
Festival of Literacies Office at OISE/UT  
2002-2004

Prepared by Katrina Grieve  
External Evaluator  
September, 2004



Festival of Literacies  
Festival de l'Alpha  
[www.literaciesOISE.ca](http://www.literaciesOISE.ca)

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Festival of Literacies, OISE/UT gratefully acknowledges the financial support provided by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, Literacy and Basic Skills Section and the National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada.

Thank you to all the literacy practitioners and administrators who took the time to participate in this evaluation. Thank you so much to Katrina Grieve (external evaluator) for all her thoughtful work.

Festival of Literacies  
AECF Rm. 7-184  
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education  
University of Toronto  
252 Bloor Street West  
Toronto, Ontario, M5S 1V6  
Tel: 416-923-6641 Ext. 2708  
Website: [www.literacies.OISE.ca](http://www.literacies.OISE.ca)  
Email: [literacies@oise.utoronto.ca](mailto:literacies@oise.utoronto.ca)

# Contents

---

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
Primary Goals	2
Evaluation Process	3
<b>Background</b>	<b>5</b>
Philosophy and Approach	5
History	7
<b>Usefulness and relevance of activities</b>	<b>10</b>
Summary of Results	10
Speaker Series	13
Building a Bridge to Graduate Studies	15
Research Circles	17
Research-in-practice project	20
Other Activities	22
<b>To what extent have these activities met the broader objectives?</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Lessons Learned</b>	<b>27</b>
What was learned about Research-in-Practice	27
Preparing for a research circle	32
<b>Goals for Increased Effectiveness</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>Appendix A: Summary of Activities for 2003/04</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>Appendix B: Speakers Series and Courses</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Appendix C: Selected Quotations from Evaluation Interviews and Questionnaires</b>	<b>44</b>

# INTRODUCTION

---

*This report includes an evaluation of the range of activities that the Festival of Literacies office has undertaken to help build research capacity in Ontario adult literacy in the last two years.*

This report documents the results of an evaluation of activities to build research capacity in Ontario adult literacy programs by the Festival of Literacies office at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education / University of Toronto (OISE/UT).

Since 2000, OISE/UT has undertaken a number of activities to consult with the Ontario adult literacy field, support the field in examining the links between research, policy and practice, and collaborate on research-in-practice initiatives. Some of these activities have been funded by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) and the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS). In 2002 the Festival of Literacies office was created at OISE/UT. While some other individuals and groups at OISE have links with the adult literacy field, this evaluation will focus exclusively on the activities of the Festival of Literacies office, from 2002-2004.

This evaluation includes a report to MTCU and NLS regarding the funded project “Practitioner-based Research and Inquiry” which was conducted in 2003/04. However it is not limited to this project. It includes an evaluation of the range of activities that the Festival of Literacies office has undertaken to help build research capacity in Ontario adult literacy in the last two years.

## ***Primary Goals***

The primary goals of this evaluation were to:

- 1.** Obtain feedback from people across literacy streams on the usefulness, impact and relevance of OISE's activities so far to build research capacity.
- 2.** Document and assess the process of research capacity building.

## Evaluation Process

*Participatory evaluation is a useful process to reflect on past experience and inform future program decisions. It also promotes the integration of evaluation into an ongoing cycle of reflection and program planning, rather than being a one-time event for limited purposes.*

The approach taken to this evaluation has been guided by the principles of “Participatory Evaluation”.<sup>1</sup> According to this approach, the goals and method of the evaluation are established using a collaborative process. This allows participants to learn not only from the final results of the evaluation, but also through being involved in the evaluation process. This approach allows participants to explore broader questions that may be pertinent to a range of stakeholders. Thus while the primary objective may be to be accountable to the funders of a particular project, participatory evaluation is a useful process to reflect on past experience and inform future program decisions. It also promotes the integration of evaluation into an ongoing cycle of reflection and program planning, rather than being a one-time event for limited purposes.

While this evaluation was conducted by an external evaluator who is not involved in the ongoing delivery of program activities, it used the participatory approach outlined above. An Evaluation Plan was drawn up with the participation of OISE/UT staff, including the overall evaluation goals, questions to be considered, a list of stakeholders, method of collecting information and timeline. Preliminary results of the evaluation were presented, discussed and analysed together with program staff. Finally, the external evaluator prepared the evaluation report.

---

<sup>1</sup> Beverly Burke (2002). “Evaluating for a Change: Reflection on Participatory Evaluation Methodology” in Whitmore, Elizabeth (ed.) Understanding and Practicing Participatory Evaluation. New Directions for Evaluation. Number 80, Winter 1998. Jossey-Bass Publishers.

To collect information from the literacy field, an email was sent out to the Festival of Literacies mailing list, consisting of over 500 practitioners, researchers and individuals who are interested or involved in adult literacy. In addition, a range of stakeholders were contacted. From these contacts, information was gathered in the following ways:

- 13 interviews (four held in-person, nine telephone interviews)
- 10 email questionnaires
- evaluation forms from speaker series events
- evaluations from five sessions held by the Trent Valley project on the practitioner-learner relationship
- a document review (including letters of support, project proposals and reports, reports on consultations, and other documentation describing the vision and approach of the Festival of Literacies office).

## BACKGROUND

---

### ***Philosophy and Approach***

*The Festival of Literacies approach revolves around the concept of "research-in-practice", which describes a range of ways to support a conversation between theory, policy and practice.*

The Festival of Literacies office has articulated a particular philosophy and approach through this work. This has been described in program documents such as articles, newsletters, proposals and on their website. This philosophy and approach revolves around the concept of "research-in-practice", which describes a range of ways to support a conversation between theory, policy and practice.

Through a variety of program documents and the interviews conducted for this evaluation, the Festival of Literacies office has described its vision of how to support "research-in-practice":

- help literacy practitioners with conceptual work in planning research
- help facilitate research-in-practice circles
- stimulate research ideas and open up possibilities regarding method and approach
- be a resource to the field bringing together the local experience of practitioners with key findings in academic research
- support a more vibrant exchange between literacy policy, research and practice



The Festival of Literacies office has chosen research circles as a primary vehicle for supporting research-in-practice. It has also chosen to target community-based programs in its initial work with the field. Over the last two years it has used different forms of research circles to:

- bring together practitioners in order to explore research ideas and develop project proposals (Adult Literacy Research Circle, Literacy and Wellness Group)
- develop and implement a research-in-practice project in partnership with literacy practitioners in one region (Trent Valley project)

In addition the Festival of Literacies office has offered a number of activities such as a speaker series and guest access to courses for community participants. These activities will be described in more detail in the next section.

## **History**

The Festival of Literacies office has evolved from a range of initiatives at OISE/UT over the last four-five years aimed at developing stronger linkages with the adult literacy field in Ontario. In the past these linkages depended on the research interests of faculty at OISE/UT and the work of particular programs and departments, including Aboriginal literacy, Centre de recherches en éducation franco-ontarienne (CREFO), and other programs within the Adult Education program. From 2000-2002, there was a more concerted effort to examine possible collaborations between the adult literacy field and OISE/UT and to explore what this relationship might look like. This consisted of a series of consultations with the adult literacy field. A number of initiatives followed, some of which were in response to the consultation, while others occurred in tandem.

**2000-2002** Series of consultations with adult literacy field

Formation of Adult Literacy Working Group (ALWG)

ALWG Report: “Building Adult Literacy Research Capacity in Ontario: A University/Community Approach”

**2001-2003** Adult Literacy Research Circle

**2002** Aboriginal Literacy Symposium

In the midst of these initiatives, there were changes in faculty. With these changes came new ideas about what OISE/UT might offer the field. In 2002, the Festival of Literacies office was created within the Department of Adult Education and Counselling Psychology. This office was to be a centre for linking with the Ontario literacy field and supporting initiatives that would enhance dialogue between research, policy and practice. In particular there was a focus on research-in-practice.

### **Festival of Literacies activities 2002-03**

- Building dialogue with relevant groups at OISE: CREFO (Francophone Centre), Adult Literacy Working Group, and research in Aboriginal literacy
- Linking with and participating in the Adult Literacy Research Circle (a circle for literacy practitioners exploring research, and ideas for research-in-practice projects)
- Providing support in the development of proposals for two research-in-practice projects as partnerships between adult literacy programs and OISE/UT; providing input into the development of another project along with partners outside Ontario (Lifelong Learning Project)
- Networking with the four Literacy Streams in the Ontario literacy field, including contributing to conferences and participating in events
- Providing input and support in development of *Literacies* journal
- Planning a conference (cancelled - not funded)
- Speaker Series (seven events)
- Guest access to three graduate courses for community participants (summer 2003)

### **Festival of Literacies activities 2003-04**

- Supporting the implementation of the research-in-practice project “What Makes the Learner-Practitioner Relationship Work” in partnership with the Trent Valley Literacy Association (Peterborough region)
- Supporting a circle of practitioners and researchers in the development of a proposal for a research-in-practice project on Literacy and Wellness.
- Speaker Series (11 events)
- Distributing educational materials at events and writing articles for publication in literacy journals and bulletins
- Development of a discussion/working paper on models of research capacity development, including a literature review of research-in-practice initiatives.
- Workshop at Ontario Literacy Coalition conference
- Guest access to three courses for community participants (summer 2004)

N.B. For a list of speaker series events and courses, see Appendix A.

# USEFULNESS AND RELEVANCE OF ACTIVITIES

---

## **Summary of Results**

*The results suggest that these activities have had a significant impact, particularly among practitioners and practitioner-researchers who have participated more intensively in these opportunities, through the research circles, speaker series events or courses.*

This evaluation set out to examine the usefulness, impact and relevance of Festival of Literacies activities to build research capacity. The results suggest that these activities have had a significant impact, particularly among practitioners and practitioner-researchers who have participated more intensively in these opportunities, through the research circles, speaker series events or courses.

## **Evidence of Usefulness & Relevance**

- growth in numbers attending speaker series events
- a number of practitioners attending events went on to enrol in courses; others entered, or resumed, a degree program
- activities attracted participants with a range of experience (in terms of both literacy experience and research experience)
- many events were organized in partnership with others such as the local literacy network Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy, the Ontario Literacy Coalition, and Aboriginal Literacy events at OISE/UT; this attracted a broader range of participants
- most respondents indicated that these activities were useful and relevant to them personally and to current issues faced by the field

## Signs of positive impact

*"...an increase in morale, excitement and renewed energy."*

From the interviews and questionnaires, many respondents indicated that these activities had a significant impact on them and their work. These participants talked about:

- an increase in morale, excitement and renewed energy
- interest in learning more about research, and in doing research
- validation, greater credibility for the knowledge of practitioners
- broadened perspective
- greater knowledge of research and understanding of policy
- an impact on practice (some indications among those participating in the Literacy and Wellness group, the Trent Valley project, and those who participated in the courses)

## Limitations

The approach and activities taken by the Festival of Literacies office has worked well for a particular group of people. For the most part, these were practitioners in and around Toronto who were able to take time away from their programs, or attend events outside of work time. The research circle approach worked better for some than for others. This will be discussed in more detail below. Overall the limitations included:

*Some practitioners were not able to take time out of their programs to participate in longer activities.*

- access to activities (except for the Trent Valley project and online courses, all activities were held in Toronto)
- time required to participate in some activities (some practitioners were not able to take time out of their programs to participate in longer-term activities)
- some of those who participated in activities using a research circle model found the process challenging – it did not suit all participants
- there have been some participants from the Deaf, Francophone and Native literacy streams; however activities have tended to attract participants from Anglophone stream programs. That said, progress has been made through recent collaborations with Aboriginal literacy activities and events.

*Some of those who participated in activities using a research circle model found the process challenging – it did not suit all participants.*

The following section will describe in more detail the activities that the Festival of Literacies office undertook, including an analysis of the achievements and limitations.

## Speaker Series

*Speakers included practitioners, individuals involved in research-in-practice, and researchers, including people from Ontario, across Canada and overseas.*

18 events were held during 2002-2004 as part of the Speaker Series (see Appendix A for details). Topics included the relationship between research and practice, literacy and numeracy policy in other parts of Canada and overseas, examples of research-in-practice in the development of particular approaches to literacy practice, and discussions on the significance of current research. Speakers included practitioners, individuals involved in research-in-practice, and researchers, including people from Ontario, across Canada and overseas. The Speaker Series format consisted of a presentation or structured discussion, followed by informal time to interact with others and to follow up particular questions and issues.

A sample of evaluation forms from these events was examined. A large majority of participants found the Speaker Series events to be relevant and worthwhile. This was supported by responses in the interviews and questionnaires.

### Strengths

- Wide range of speakers and topics
- Broadened the discussion about literacy in Toronto
- This was “a space where people talk about literacy differently”
- “It takes you out of your own little literacy world into a broader context. It helps you see how your work is connected.”
- “These events are motivating. They make you think back about why you got involved in literacy”

*"It takes you out of your own little literacy world into a broader context. It helps you see how your work is connected."*



*"It takes us to another level in our literacy work and learning."*

- Opportunity to network with others in the field, to have informal conversations, to build national and international connections
- Beneficial to have people from different disciplines: "we get a different view that way"
- "It takes us to another level in our literacy work and learning"

Other positive aspects included collaborations with other groups in order to offer these events. In particular, a number of events were co-sponsored with either Aboriginal Literacy activities at OISE, or with a local network or program. Signing was provided at a number of events based on the interest expressed by members of the Deaf community. These aspects resulted in some increased participation by practitioners from the Native literacy stream, and less so from the Deaf stream.

### **Limitations**

*Time the events are held is inconvenient for some: they cannot leave the program.*

- Time the events are held is inconvenient for some: they cannot leave the program
- Sessions offered only in Toronto
- For some people, some topics were more useful than others
- Some wanted more topics directly related to practice
- Some wanted more focussed discussions

## ***Building a Bridge to Graduate Studies***

*This has included arranging for literacy practitioners to visit as guests in graduate level courses at OISE/UT, contributing their community-based perspectives to the graduate classroom.*

The Festival of Literacies office has undertaken a number of initiatives to build dialogue between the university and the field. This has included arranging for literacy practitioners to visit as guests in graduate-level courses at OISE/UT, contributing their community based perspectives to the graduate classroom. Practitioners had access to three graduate-level courses offered through the department of Adult Education at OISE/UT in the summer of 2003 and three more in the summer of 2004.

Overall there was great enthusiasm among those who visited in the courses. People spoke about the profound impact it had in terms of their level of motivation, how they think about their work, and the place of research in their work in the future.

### **Strengths**

*"Provided an opportunity to look at the literature, to think, to discuss and consider what literacy is"*

- Deepened participants' understanding of literacy research
- "Provided an opportunity to look at the literature, to think, to discuss and consider what literacy is"
- "Opportunity to pilot a research question which then had an impact on my practice"
- "Provided motivation to look past the day-to-day and connect what I do with learners to current literature"
- New level of understanding of issues in research and research-in-practice
- Learning about different types of research and how to critique it

- Helped promote critical reading
- Built knowledge collaboratively
- “Helped build understanding of the thinking behind changes in policy and the context behind pressures being applied on programs”

### **Limitations**

- Several practitioners wanted to participate but were unable to, due to the timing of the courses, and the time commitment involved
- Some would prefer literacy courses to be spread out through the year, not just in summers, in order to be able to participate in more courses

## **Research Circles**

*This research circle culminated with the submission of a project proposal regarding learner progress involving three community-based programs in Toronto and one in Guelph. The project has received funding for 2004/05.*

From 2001-2003 OISE/UT hosted the Adult Literacy Research Circle with cost-shared funding from MTCU and NLS. The Adult Literacy Research Circle was a circle of literacy practitioners and researchers exploring research ideas and sharing relevant knowledge from both research and practice. OISE/UT staff provided support in facilitating the process, which included the development of research questions, identification of relevant research and research project design. The Festival of Literacies staff joined the research circle part-way through the process, as it was started by another faculty member, Prof. Daniel Schugurensky. This research circle culminated with the submission of a project proposal regarding learner progress involving three community-based programs in Toronto and one in Guelph. This project was not funded in 2003/04. However the project was subsequently re-submitted and has received funding for 2004/05.

In 2003-2004 the Festival of Literacies office initiated a somewhat different process to support the development of another project proposal generated by literacy practitioners. This initiative grew out of the original Adult Literacy Research Circle, though it was almost a year before they began to meet. A facilitator paid by the Festival office brought together a number of literacy practitioners, researchers and health practitioners interested in pursuing the connections between literacy and health. In 2004, this group wrote and submitted a proposal to the Wellesley Health Centre for Community-Based Research for the development stage of a research-in-practice project on Literacy and Wellness, though the proposal was ultimately not funded.

## Accomplishments / Strengths

*Practitioners gained from the opportunity to develop research ideas together with others based on common experiences and issues, and connect this to broader research.*

*Practitioners went back to their programs to gather learners' perspectives and then analysed these responses together with the group.*

- Two project proposals were submitted as a result of the research circles.
- Practitioners gained from the opportunity to develop research ideas together with others based on common experiences and issues, and connect this to broader research.
- The second group brought in practitioners from the health sector. These connections were valuable to the group and added different perspectives to the work.
- The strengths of the second group included the way in which practitioners went back to their programs to gather learners' perspectives, and then analysed these responses together with the group. This interaction provided further depth to the process. Some commented that this process is having an impact on their practice.
- As a result of this work, learners were exploring the option of meeting together with other learners across programs to explore the topic of literacy and wellness further.

## Limitations

- Some stopped attending meetings of the research circle because they couldn't manage the time commitment.
- Different people came to different meetings (because of their availability). This affected the continuity of the group.

*There were different perspectives regarding the pace of developing research ideas.*

- There were different perspectives regarding the pace of developing research ideas. Some wanted the process to slow down, and to reconsider fundamental questions, while others wanted to get on to something more concrete such as creating a proposal or beginning to collect data.
- Some found the process too open, without enough focus.
- Some participants found it difficult to continue given these and other differences (in perspectives, cultural experience, goals etc...) and subsequently left the group.

*It was difficult for practitioners in the Adult Literacy Research Circle to find time to get things done between meetings.*

- It was difficult for practitioners in the Adult Literacy Research Circle to find the time to get things done between meetings. One person commented that without additional resources, it was not realistic that programs could carry out their own research. Even doing significant development work towards a funding proposal was a challenge. (This group did not receive any financial compensation for their involvement, whereas the second group of practitioners received honoraria).
- Wellesley Centre eventually rejected this application because their priorities shifted to youth projects for the current year. This experience reinforced the long term planning required for research capacity development.

## ***Research-in-practice project***

In 2003/04, the Festival of Literacies office provided support in the development and implementation of a research project by the Trent Valley Literacy Association entitled “What Makes the Learner-Practitioner Relationship Work?” This project used a research circle process, whereby paid literacy practitioners and volunteer tutors met every month over the course of six months. In between these meetings they documented their reflections in journals and analysed these entries at subsequent meetings. OISE faculty and staff from the Festival of Literacies office supported the process, delivered workshops, and acted as resources when requested by the practitioner group.

### **Strengths**

*The journaling provided a rich source of information, capturing valuable aspects of literacy practice.*

- The involvement of faculty from OISE/UT gave the group confidence in the process.
- This gave further validity to qualitative research involving a research circle process, which was something that the group was not previously familiar with.
- The journaling provided a rich source of information, capturing valuable aspects of literacy practice.
- Although it was a challenge to have practitioners with such a wide range of experience (from new volunteers to very experienced group facilitators), this also added to the value of the project. It was a wonderful learning experience for many of the participants.

*"As a group it gave us an appreciation of how complex literacy tutoring process is and how exciting..."*

- According to some, the impact on practitioners was significant. Although at the time of this evaluation participants considered it too soon to see the impact on practice, they believed that the process of reflecting on the learner-practitioner relationship would have an impact on practice.
- "As a group it gave us an appreciation of how complex literacy tutoring process is and how exciting...the project made people more aware of the affective aspect of learning".
- "I also learned other ideas about research. This was a revelation to me. This type of project opens doors for understanding. I would do it again for sure. We really grew from it – and this says something about our process".

### **Limitations**

*There was some discomfort with journaling as a method and with the lack of structure, particularly at the beginning.*

*It was challenging to balance the needs and interests of such a diverse group of people...*

- It took time to get comfortable with the research circle process.
- There was some discomfort with journaling as a method and with the lack of structure, particularly at the beginning.
- Two members of the group found the process too loose, and too slow given their own needs and goals. They left the group.
- There was some uncertainty regarding roles and it took time to work this out (role of group's facilitator, Festival of Literacies staff, OISE faculty)
- It was challenging to balance the needs and interests of such a diverse group of people with such a wide range of experience.



## Other Activities

*Building bridges to overcome historical distrust between university and the field, and across different literacy streams*

Staff at the Festival of Literacies office identified a range of activities that are involved in setting up and developing the activities listed above. They described this work as a significant piece of the process of building research capacity.

### **This work has included:**

- Communication and networking with practitioners and various groups representing the adult literacy field in Ontario
- Building bridges to overcome historical distrust between the university and the field, and across different literacy streams
- Increasing cross-stream work through “Festival and Aboriginal Literacy events”
- OISE faculty from the Festival of Literacies speaking at a two-day training for the Deaf stream in Ontario
- OISE faculty delivering a workshop at the Ontario Literacy Coalition Conference
- Connecting to research-in-practice networks in Canada and overseas, including participating in national conferences funded by National Literacy Secretariat: B.C. in 2002, Newfoundland in 2003
- Building on opportunities: setting up speaker series events for literacy practitioners to hear from experts in the field from across Canada and overseas, when they are passing through Ontario

*Connecting to research-in-practice networks in Canada and overseas, including participating in national conferences funded by National Literacy Secretariat: B.C. in 2002, Newfoundland in 2003.*

- Providing support in the formation of the *Literacies* journal
- Providing input and support in the development of the Lifelong Learning Project, in partnership with three organizations across Canada
- Fielding requests for partnerships with Ontario literacy programs

### **Challenges of this Work**

- Balancing the volume and diversity of requests for partnerships and support with available resources
- Need for clarity regarding the role of staff at the Festival of Literacies office at OISE/UT (need for clarity both internally at OISE and externally)
- Balancing priorities: there has been considerable effort made to bring together those with interest and experience with research-in-practice in Ontario. However, it is the national and international contacts who have the most expertise with research-in-practice. It takes time and resources to bring in these contacts.
- The Festival of Literacies office has identified cross-stream work as an important part of their approach. However, it has also had to be sensitive to the different needs and priorities of each literacy stream. This includes respecting the desire within particular streams to focus on developing distinctive approaches to research that respond to their own needs.

*The Festival of Literacies office has identified cross-stream work as an important part of their approach.*

## TO WHAT EXTENT HAVE THESE ACTIVITIES MET THE BROADER OBJECTIVES?

---

As described earlier, the broader objectives of the Festival of Literacies office have been to:

*help literacy practitioners with conceptual work in planning research*

1. help literacy practitioners with conceptual work in planning research
2. stimulate research ideas and open up possibilities regarding method and approach
3. be a resource to the field bringing together the local experience of practitioners with key findings in academic research
4. support a more vibrant exchange between literacy policy, research and practice

*be a resource to the field bringing together the local experience of practitioners with key findings in academic research*

To a considerable extent, the research circles met the first two objectives. They provided a format to help literacy practitioners develop ideas for research, engage in the conceptual work in planning research and consider different possibilities regarding method and approach. Each research circle did this to a different extent. The Adult Literacy Research Circle spent a considerable amount of time on conceptual work and developing research ideas. Although the Literacy and Wellness group met only for a short time, they gave considerable focus to conceptual work, as well as questions of method and approach. Both these activities led to the submission of project proposals.

*Many participants indicated that they did not have experience with this approach, and would not have tried it without the support and encouragement of OISE mentors with academic research experience.*

The Trent Valley research-in-practice project also used a research circle approach. However, in that case, more of the conceptual work had been completed before the group formed formally. The involvement of OISE/UT opened up new possibilities regarding project method and approach. The group chose qualitative research using practitioner journaling as a method of collecting information. Many participants indicated that they did not have experience with this approach, and would not have tried it without the support and encouragement of OISE mentors with academic research experience. They subsequently commented on the value this approach had for their own development as practitioners, as well as for the project findings.

The speaker series events were successful in meeting the third objective. They were effective in providing opportunities for practitioners' to share common issues from their experience and to make connections to relevant research.

Access to graduate courses as community visitors has been very effective in meeting all four objectives. This brief but intensive contact between literacy practitioners and individuals with extensive experience in both research-in-practice and academia has had a profound effect on participants and their work. There are early indications that these experiences have contributed to an increase in involvement in research for a number of practitioners, as well as an increased interest in continue education.

*All of the activities contribute in some way to the fourth objective: to support a more vibrant exchange between literacy policy, research and practice.*

All of the activities contributed in some way to the fourth objective: to support a more vibrant exchange between literacy policy, research and practice. However the extent of this is difficult to assess at this time, as it is a longer-term objective. Clearly, those who participated in a variety of activities or who participated more intensively in activities over a period of time have benefited the most. There was a particularly strong emphasis on examining the links between research and practice. In terms of policy, a number of events have discussed literacy policy and its evolution. In this way participants have developed a greater understanding of literacy policy and how it is formed. However, it is more difficult to assess whether OISE activities have created a more vibrant exchange between research and policy, or between practice and policy. This will be something to examine after several years have elapsed.

As this evaluation was concluding, a number of practitioners and researchers from Ontario participated in the Centre for Literacy's 2004 Summer Institute in Montreal on the Impact of Policy on Practice. This event included a variety of participants including practitioners, researchers and policy makers from Canada and overseas. The participation of a number of practitioners and researchers from Ontario was due in part to the encouragement and support of the Festival of Literacies office.

*The challenge will be to reach a wider group of literacy practitioners, outside the Toronto area.*

Overall the activities of the Festival of Literacies office have made significant strides in meeting the broader objectives for those who have actively participated in events. However the challenge will be to reach a wider group of literacy practitioners, outside the Toronto area. While the Trent Valley project and online courses have helped to extend these activities to those in a wider geographical area, more efforts will be required in order to have a wide impact on the literacy field in Ontario.

See Appendix B for a list of quotes from this evaluation that reflect the broader impact that these activities have had on participants.

## LESSONS LEARNED

---

This evaluation created an opportunity to reflect on the process of building research capacity through a research-in-practice approach. There were a number of key lessons learned in reviewing the activities of the Festival of Literacy office and their approach.

### ***What was learned about Research-in-Practice***

*Research-in-practice not only creates knowledge about research among practitioners, it also engages practitioners in critical reflection regarding literacy practice, and creates potential for practice to inform future research and policy.*

◆ **Research-in-Practice has promise as an approach**

The results of the Festival of Literacies activities suggest that research-in-practice is a promising approach. These activities show that research-in-practice not only creates knowledge about research among practitioners, it also engages practitioners in critical reflection regarding literacy practice, and creates potential for practice to inform future research and policy. These experiences suggest that research-in-practice has a longer-term impact in terms of the results of practitioner-based research and also in terms of professional development.

◆ **There is not a single model for Research Circles**

Success depends on supporting approaches suited to the background, culture and temperament of members of the group. Local leadership is an important factor in determining a suitable approach.

The Festival of Literacies has worked with a variety of types of research circles for different durations and purposes. Through these experiences they have not come up with a generic research circle model. Their experience shows that success depends on supporting approaches suited to the background, culture and temperament of members of the group. Local leadership is an important factor in determining a suitable approach.

◆ **To ensure quality research, participants need to understand the importance of taking time to think more broadly**

Reflecting on the experience of supporting a number of research circles, staff of the Festival of Literacies office affirmed that an important part of the process of developing and implementing a research-in-practice project with literacy practitioners is situating the research. This involves considering what the research literature has to say about the issues being explored. It also involves taking the time to step back and think more broadly about the research question and range of research strategies available. Some participants found it challenging to go back to broader questions. However staff felt that this was an essential part of the process. They concluded that the challenge in research circles is finding the appropriate moments to step back, reflect on the literature and think more broadly.

*The challenge in research circles is finding the appropriate moments to step back, reflect on the literature and think more broadly.*

*One of the challenges of research circles is working with a range of individuals with different backgrounds, experience and perspectives.*

◆ **In order for Research Circles to be effective, it is important to create a common interest or have a shared project**

One of the challenges of research circles is working with a range of individuals with different backgrounds, experience and perspectives. There were significant differences in how people responded to being involved in the research circles. Some could cope with going back to questions such as “what are we doing?” and “why are we doing it?”, whereas others were frustrated by this and sometimes dropped out. Some were more tolerant with ambiguity than others. In addition some had a difficult time coping with differences in the group. There were a number of factors involved including:

- some people are “doers”, while others are “thinkers”
- personality differences
- cultural differences
- difference in experience and roles
- different political and theoretical starting points

The conclusion of those involved was that creating a common interest was an essential part of the process. This was what made it possible to work with these differences. It also helped to have a shared project. For the Trent Valley project, being responsible for implementing a funded project gave a strong impetus to continue working together, despite bumps along the way. In the case of the Adult Literacy Research Circle, momentum was lost when the project they had spent so long developing did not receive approval for funding.



◆ **Success depends on working with differences and making these differences explicit**

*It is important to make it explicit from the beginning that there will be many differences among members of the group, and that success depends on working with these differences.*

A number of people dropped out of the Adult Literacy Research Circle and two dropped out of the Trent Valley project. Part of the reasons for this was the time commitment. However, another factor was the difficulty they had in working with a group that had so many differences. The learning that has been taken from this experience is that it is important to make it explicit from the beginning that there will be many differences among members of the group, and that success depends on working with these differences. Likewise it is important to set a climate where people don't see these differences as barriers but as resources for a broader understanding.

◆ **There is a need to be clear about the roles of the partners**

*At times there was a lack of clarity regarding each individual's role and the nature of their involvement .*

In each of the research circle activities with which the Festival of Literacies was involved there were different arrangements regarding the roles of Festival of Literacies staff and OISE faculty. In the Trent Valley project, there was a local facilitator who was also a member of the research circle, a support person from the Festival of Literacies who also attended group meetings, and an OISE/UT faculty member from the Festival office who provided general guidance and support at certain points in the process. At times there was a lack of clarity regarding each individual's role and the nature of their involvement. This concern was echoed by participants in other research circles.

Reflecting on these experiences, the staff of the Festival of Literacies office identified a number of questions to be considered in setting up a research circle. They talked about the importance of working out the answers to these questions and negotiating them along the way.

- What model of research circle would best suit this context?
- What are the key dimensions of facilitating a research circle?
- What issues are involved?
- What facilitation style is needed for this kind of process?
- What role does the facilitator have in bringing in her own perspective or outside information?
- What is the scope of each person's role (eg. member of the group, facilitator, mentor, senior mentor)?
- Who is responsible for financial information regarding the project (if applicable) and how does this get shared with the group?

◆ **Time and financial resources affect participation**

*The Trent Valley project paid practitioners to be involved in the project. Although this was not a large sum of money, it seemed to make a difference in terms of attendance at meetings and the work that was accomplished between meetings.*

A number of practitioners stated that they wanted to participate in research circle activities but were unable to because of lack of time and resources. Others attended a few sessions but could not continue on a longer-term basis. As a result, some research circles were attended primarily by individuals who were willing and able to participate on their own time, and who had flexibility in their work schedules. Attendance varied from session to session. In contrast the Trent Valley project paid practitioners to be involved in the project. Although this was not a large sum of money, it seemed to make a difference in terms of attendance at meetings and the work that was accomplished between meetings. This issue should be considered when designing a project involving a research circle of literacy practitioners.

## ***Preparing for a research circle***

As a result of this experience, the Festival of Literacies office has a number of recommendations for others who are considering using a research circle process. The following items should be discussed in advance and then monitored and negotiated on an ongoing basis.

*Consider cultural issues and the range of backgrounds and experience within the group. Make any differences explicit and talk about working with these differences.*

*Think through how and when to take the opportunity to look at the research literature.*

- Work out the roles of the facilitator and research mentors and communicate this to the group.
- Look at who can provide local leadership, particularly when working with a group that is geographically distant.
- Consider cultural issues and the range of backgrounds and experience within the group. Make any differences explicit and talk about working with these differences.
- Consider how the facilitator and any outside research mentors will draw on their understanding of the research process and research-in-practice experience. Keep clarifying this with the group.
- Think through how and when to take the opportunity to look at the research literature.
- Be clear about roles and responsibilities in terms of on-going leadership, planning and facilitation.
- Consider travel logistics, particularly for outside research mentors.
- Prepare a time budget for the outside mentors.
- Review available resources.

## GOALS FOR INCREASED EFFECTIVENESS

---

Based on the evaluation findings, the following goals are suggested for the Festival of Literacies to increase their effectiveness in building research capacity in the adult literacy field in Ontario:

1. Broaden the scope of activities to reach practitioners in different parts of Ontario
2. Spread out the courses in which literacy practitioners may participate as visitors
3. Enhance communications and information exchange internally and externally

The following are some preliminary ideas regarding how the Festival of Literacies may begin to achieve these goals.

### **1. Broaden the scope of activities to reach practitioners in different parts of Ontario**

*Explore the options for providing more support to practitioners outside of Toronto.*

- Explore the options for providing more support to practitioners outside of Toronto.
- Consider providing research training events in a variety of geographic regions.
- Explore ways to enhance access to events held in Toronto (audio taping or videotaping events and providing access to these tapes by practitioners in other regions).
- Consider offering more events and access online.

## **2. Spread out literacy courses in which practitioners may participate as visitors**

Over the last two years, literacy practitioners have been invited to visit in graduate level courses. Three courses were available to visitors each summer. In order to expand access to these courses, it is recommended that OISE:

- Spread out the graduate courses to which literacy practitioners are invited as community visitors.
- Offer access to courses and events at different times of year, and in a variety of formats (online, one evening per week, short-term intensive).

## **3. Enhance communications and information exchange internally and externally**

### a. External communications

*Continue using email as a vehicle for distributing information regarding events and courses and expand the list to a broader group across Ontario.*

- Continue using email as a vehicle for distributing information regarding events and courses and expand the list to a broader group across Ontario.
- Seek out ways to communicate with the rest of Ontario and review these activities every six months. Consider using AlphaCom as a vehicle for publicizing activities and events to literacy practitioners across Ontario.
- Publish a brief newsletter once or twice a year to keep the field informed of recent activities and initiatives of the Festival of Literacies office.

- b. Clarity regarding roles
  - Present greater clarity regarding the distinctive roles of OISE/UT faculty and Festival of Literacies staff.
  - Ensure clarity of roles regarding those involved in delivering and supporting any research training.
  
- c. Internal OISE/UT communications and Information Exchange
  - Enhance internal communication within OISE/UT for information exchange regarding activities across departments and programs.

*Set two-year strategic periods to focus on building links with cultural communities.*

- d. Communications with streams and cultural communities
  - Set two-year strategic periods to focus on building links with cultural communities.
  - Continue to build connections with the Aboriginal stream/community.

**4. Introduce more varied mechanisms to consult with the adult literacy field and seek guidance as needed**

In addition to a report on deliverables, the Festival of Literacies office asked for guidance from this evaluation on their efforts to date to seek advice from the field. The feedback on this question from many of those contacted for this evaluation was that there are many challenges of having advisory committees: they can be costly, add significant administrative work, and can be too rigid to meet changing needs. Based on the suggestions provided by these respondents and on an analysis of the work of the Festival of Literacies work to date, it is recommended that the Festival of Literacies office take the following steps:

*Explore more varied mechanisms to periodically consult with the field.*

- Explore more varied mechanisms to periodically consult with the field – at tables with diverse representation from literacy sectors, streams and geographic regions.
- Where useful, create time-limited advisory groups specific to particular projects.
- Set goals for reaching out to particular groups within the adult literacy field in Ontario (eg. For the short-term, continue to work with Aboriginal community and reach out to the community-based sector beyond Toronto. Then reach out increasingly to the school-board sector).

## **APPENDIX A: SUMMARY OF ACTIVITIES FOR 2003/04**

---

This evaluation report is one of the formal deliverables for the OISE/UT project “Practitioner-based Research and Inquiry” funded by MTCU and NLS in 2003/04. The project focused on activities to build research capacity through the promotion, development and support of practitioner-based research and inquiry. The following is a list of activities relevant to the formal deliverables for this project. A more detailed description of the strengths and challenges of these activities is provided earlier in this report.

### **1. ENGAGING IN COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH**

#### **a) Successful implementation of practitioner-based research project “What Makes the Learner-Practitioner Relationship Work?”**

OISE/UT worked in partnership with the Trent Valley Literacy Association to carry out a collaborative research project with literacy practitioners regarding the learner-practitioner relationship. OISE/UT provided on-going support in the development and implementation of this project, and to the external evaluator.

#### **b) On-going support in re-submission of project on progress in community-based literacy programs.**

This collaborative project was initially submitted in 2003 as a result of the work of the Adult Literacy Research Circle. Although it did not receive funding for 2003-04, those involved continued to participate in Festival of Literacies Initiatives at OISE/UT. OISE/UT supported them to reapply and a revised proposal has been approved for funding in 2004-05.

#### **c) Incubation of a research-in-practice project on “Literacy and Wellness”.**

In collaboration with the research project of Daniel Schugurensky, a facilitator initiated a number of meetings with researchers, literacy practitioners and community health providers to explore the links between literacy and health. As a result of their work together, this group submitted a funding proposal to the Wellesley Central Health Centre for a developmental grant for a research-in-practice project on Literacy and Wellness. This work contributed to Phase II of the Adult Literacy



Research Circle. Despite considerable encouragement to make this application, Wellesley eventually rejected this application in favour of placing a new priority on youth projects for the current year.

## **2. CONTRIBUTING TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF FORMAL RESEARCH REPORTS, EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOPS/PRESENTATIONS.**

### **a) Contribution to the research report for the Trent Valley project**

The Festival of Literacies office provided support in the development of the formal research report for the project “What Makes the Learner-Practitioner Relationship Work?”

### **b) Speaker Series**

The Speaker Series was a series of professional development workshops/presentations carried out by the Festival of Literacies office. These events aimed to promote practitioner-based research and inquiry and create dialogue between research and practice. They were also a vehicle for promoting and distributing relevant materials, reports, and short articles. Many of these events were presented in partnership with other groups (see collaborations below). 10 out of the 17 events were held from September 2003 to June 2004.

### **c) Presentation of information regarding research-in-practice initiatives at the Ontario Literacy Coalition Conference in June 2004**

At the OLC Conference, the Festival of Literacies office at OISE/UT distributed a newsletter summarizing recent activities and providing information regarding research-in-practice initiatives. In addition, two workshops were presented related to research-in-practice. One was presented by participants in the above-mentioned research-in-practice project on the learner-practitioner relationship. The other was presented by Nancy Jackson of OISE/UT regarding what research-in-practice tells us about workplace literacy.

#### **d) Educational Materials**

Reports, short articles, and other educational materials were promoted and distributed at the Speaker Series events. These included:

- An article by Nayda Veeman on research comparing literacy policy in Canada and Sweden.
- The article: “A Framework to Encourage and Support Practitioner Involvement in Adult Literacy Research in Practice in Canada” by Mary Norton and Jenny Horsman
- “A Traveller’s Guide to Literacy Research in Practice” by Mary Norton

Articles were also published in adult literacy bulletins and journals:

- Article by Nancy Jackson in the journal *Literacies* #3, Spring 2004.
- Article by Nancy Jackson in the OLC Bulletin *Workplace Literacy*, September 2003.
- Two articles in the journal *Literacies* #4, Fall 2004, on the work of the Adult Literacy Research Circle – Phase Two:
  - 1) “Literacy Workers and Health Practitioners Talk About Wellness and Learning” (by Festival of Literacies staff)
  - 2) “Learners at Literacy for East Toronto Talk About Wellness” (by one of the practitioner-researchers involved)

Professional development materials were handed out at a workshop regarding the Trent Valley research project at the OLC Conference in June 2004.

The Festival of office began to undertake videotaping of speaker series events for use as educational materials.

#### **e. Proposal for research training model**

The Festival of Literacies office developed a proposal for a cost-shared program of research training modules.

### **3. COLLABORATIONS AND PARTNERSHIPS**

#### **a) Collaborations with AlphaPlus**

The Festival of Literacies has worked in collaboration with AlphaPlus in a number of ways. It has contributed to the evaluation of the AlphaPlus Research Portal. The Festival of Literacies is also developing materials in collaboration with AlphaPlus for research training modules. This includes developing approaches to online delivery. Finally, the Festival of Literacies has promoted AlphaPlus resources at Speaker Series events. Staff from AlphaPlus have attended many of these events and have provided displays of their materials.

#### **b) Collaborations with Aboriginal Literacy initiatives**

Festival of Literacies staff collaborated on a number of Aboriginal Literacy initiatives by Professor Eileen Antone at OISE/UT. This included jointly sponsoring speaker series events on topics of mutual interest. These initiatives are part of efforts to build bridges across cultural streams.

#### **c) Other partnerships**

Some of the speaker series events were presented in partnership with other groups. These included the Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy and the Ontario Literacy Coalition.

### **4. DISCUSSION/WORKING PAPER ON MODELS OF RESEARCH CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT**

- A discussion/working paper on models of research capacity development is being prepared for submission. This includes a literature review of research-in-practice initiatives. This will be a resource to the adult literacy field.

## APPENDIX B: SPEAKERS SERIES AND COURSES

---

### SPEAKER SERIES 2004

June 7	Dr. Joan Connolly	Reading Story – Orality, Literacy and Holistic Knowledges
May 18	Lee Maracle David Conroy	“Health, Wellness and Literacy Dialogue: Intersections of Perspectives” Talking Circle (one-day event)
Apr. 20	Dr. Guy Ewing	Skills / Practices / Literacy Learning
Feb. 23	Nayda Veeman	Adult Education in Canada and Sweden: Policy Differences
Jan. 20	Nancy Cooper	Indigenous Knowledges in Native Literacy
Jan. 16	Book Launch	<i>Reading Work: Literacies in the Workplace</i>

### SPEAKER SERIES 2003

Dec. 3	Tracy Westell Sheila Stewart	Discussion of <i>Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope</i> by bell hooks
Nov. 25	Frontier College	Literacy and Disabilities
Oct. 23	Tannis Atkinson Tracy Westell	Literacies: Linking Research and Practice in Print - A discussion of the new Literacies Journal
Sept. 18	Linda Shohet	Quebec and International Threads on Adult Literacy as part of the Lifelong Learning Continuum
Apr. 28	Katrina Grieve Patricia Brady	Supporting Learning, Supporting Change

## **SPEAKER SERIES 2002**

Nov 6	OISE Faculty	Are you thinking of Graduate Studies in Adult Literacy?
Aug. 27	Dr. Leslie Shelton	Multiple Intelligences Made Easy: Using all your smarts to learn.
June 24	Dave Tout Beth Marr	Numeracy and Literacy Practices and Policies in Australia: some highs and lows.
June 13	Mary Norton	Research in Practice: using art and music to support learning
June 6	Panel	Adult Literacy and Research. How can research help us? A panel of literacy practitioners and researchers from across Canada.
Apr. 4	Jean Connon-Unda	Workplace Literacy: Labour of Love

N.B. Many of these events were co-sponsored with the Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy. Others were co-sponsored as Festival of Literacies and Aboriginal Literacy events. The Ontario Literacy Coalition was also a co-sponsor.

## **Graduate Courses open to visitors**

### **Summer 2003**

1. “An Introduction to Research-in-Practice in Adult Literacy”  
Instructor: Dr. Mary Norton, The Learning Centre, Edmonton, Alberta. Offered online, May-June 2003.
2. “Contemporary Social Issues: Social Practice Approaches to Workplace Literacy”  
Instructor: Dr. Nancy Jackson, Department of Adult Education & Counselling Psychology, OISE/UT. Offered May-June, 2003 at OISE/UT.
3. “An Introduction to Social Practice Theories in Adult Literacy”  
Instructor: Dr. Mary Hamilton, Lancaster University, UK.  
Offered July-August, 2003 at OISE/UT.

### **Summer 2004** (participant comments not included in this evaluation)

1. “Special Topics: Oral and Written Language in Adult Literacy Learning”  
Instructor: Dr. Guy Ewing  
Offered May to June, 2004 at OISE/UT.
2. “Contemporary Issues in Adult Literacy: Women, Violence and Literacy Learning: Impacts and Options”  
Instructor: Dr. Jenny Horsman  
Offered July - August, 2004 at OISE/UT
3. Special Topics: Workplace Literacies: Theory, Policy and Practice  
Instructor: Dr. Nancy Jackson, Department of Adult Education & Counselling Psychology, OISE/UT.  
Offered online May - June, 2004

## APPENDIX C: SELECTED QUOTATIONS FROM EVALUATION INTERVIEWS AND QUESTIONNAIRES

---

The following quotations show the kind of impact the Festival of Literacies activities have had on some participants and their work, particularly those who were involved more intensively with these activities.

*“The Speaker Series has opened up the whole world of literacy to the field. These sessions have addressed the challenges of delivery within a broader perspective. This has been very refreshing. Those involved are coming up with ideas, discussing solutions... it’s just intoxicating... It makes the field feel more like a field and draws people together in a very useful way, especially in terms of professional development and support... These sessions have opened up conversations again. People can dream again and feed each other in some way.”*

*“I hope that the Speaker Series continues. It’s really valuable. People really love it. At the first speaker series event there were eight people. Now there are not enough chairs... It gives you the capacity to do your work better. It makes it easier.”*

*“I now recognize how important it is for us to consider who we are, how we think, and how this impacts the research we do. I am more able to facilitate what learners choose to learn, to assist them to voice their opinions regarding social concerns impacting their lives and to help them realize their own hopes through action.”*

*“Visiting in courses gave us exposure to current theory and the opportunity to compare practices at a national and international level. They also gave me the opportunity to pilot a research question which had an impact on my practice. They have further motivated me to look past the day-to-day...and connect what I do with learners to current literature.”*

*“The course I visited was brilliant. It was an opportunity to get my hands on literature, to think, to discuss, and to consider what literacy is. It gave me a new level of understanding of issues in research and research-in-practice. It made me realize how important it is to examine that connection. I learned something about quantitative research – how it works, why it works and how to critique it. I also learned how important it is to think carefully about our research design.”*

*“It has had an impact on my practice: how I do one to one tutoring and how I do tutor training. I now examine what I’m doing from a different perspective”.*

*“OISE staff was instrumental in providing a comfortable environment, facilitation, and knowledgeable input regarding research methodology”*

*“The Festival of Literacies has helped me to situate my thoughts and concerns within larger discussion about literacy learning. It has fuelled my excitement about literacy work, and created a place where I feel that the experience of literacy workers is valued.”*

*“One thing we see is getting to more fundamental questions about practice. For this group [for literacy practitioners], this happens orally. In academia this kind of questioning happens more individually. Here it’s a collective process. I can see ideas infiltrating different groups. It’s about taking ourselves seriously as thinkers. As practitioners, we usually think of ourselves as doers. It’s about the place of reflective practitioners: how do I structure time for this and push it further? How do I ask a more probing question? What place does it get to? How does it get taken back?” [Festival of Literacies staff]*



*“These are my observations of the group involved in the Trent Valley project: They are not just participants; they are seeing themselves as researchers.” [Festival of Literacies staff]*

*“I feel that the work that they’ve been trying to do has been really important in terms of supporting the field and in deepening our work. I hope that this is acknowledged and gets recognized.”*

*“Support from the Festival of Literacies was extremely important at the beginning [in setting up the Literacies Journal]. It gave me an orientation to who was doing what in different parts of the country, and in Ontario. Our conversations helped to inform my thinking about what the content of the journal needed to be and what it might look like. It gave me a historical background and helped with the different ways to get the word out about the Journal to academia... Without the Festival office’s support, the Literacies Journal would be less relevant to people’s needs.”*

*“As a result of these activities, the Ontario Literacy Coalition feels closer to the research community, which we have a strong interest in.”*