



What goes on here:

Practitioners Study the
Student - Practitioner Relationship



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The images are created through a process of fabric layering. The initial stages of background are established. Then the detail of the foreground is created.

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PROLOGUE



#JohnTerryDyer

IN THE BEGINNING

The thrust for this research took place early in the summer of 2002, after a routine regional meeting of administrators of adult literacy programs. A few of us meandered through a number of issues that affected our work as practitioners¹ in adult literacy. Gradually the exasperation built, as it so often can. We had a story to tell about literacy work – its complexities, messiness, frustrations, excitement and small celebrations. Occasionally a barrier was successfully bridged. Often another loomed up to replace it. We agreed that our story needed telling, both for others in the field, and for ourselves. We needed to explore what was going on in a tutoring² session, what made it click or go astray. We knew that the statistics submitted each month as evidence of our literacy work didn't suffice. The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT) had informed the literacy community in September, 2001 that it was interested in assisting literacy workers with research, particularly with a strategy called the “research-in-practice circle.” However, at that time they needed to limit their recruits to the Toronto area. Here was an opportunity to see if any of their professors would be interested in venturing further afield geographically. We e-mailed the professors at OISE/UT who had originally invited literacy workers to join the research field. One responded immediately and her interest and enthusiasm for our project encouraged us to actually take action.

We developed a proposal in cooperation with two staff members from OISE/UT, submitted it and received funding in July, 2003. Our research project – “What makes the learner-practitioner relationship work: A research-in-practice circle analysis” - was to go ahead! Our proposal had described how we would look intently at ourselves as practitioners and why it was important to try to capture what was really going on in our relationship with our student. However, none of us had experienced the research-in-practice circle, certainly not a circle with more than five or six participants. Additionally, as is characteristic with this type of research, we were unsure of what we might discover.

In late July, the core group of five met to plan how to proceed. We hoped that if a group of us recorded what we were doing each tutoring session and then met to extract the common strands, we would capture something of the essence of the tutoring relationship and its significance for student learning and progress.

We decided to enlarge our circle by asking at least one more practitioner from each program represented by the original five. As it turned out, every person present in

¹ In this report we are using the term “practitioner” to refer to both volunteers and paid instructors.

² In this report, we are using the term “tutoring” to refer to teaching of small groups and classes as well, primarily because much of what we do in these settings is also one-to-one.

the core group already had one or more practitioners in mind and so we began with thirteen participants. Seven practitioners were volunteer tutors (one volunteered with one program although she was a paid administrator of another); the remaining seven were paid staff and of those seven, five were administering programs. There were initially five programs represented. Four were community based, while one operated under the auspices of the school board. We had seasoned teachers as well as those who joined us from very different professional fields. We had experienced literacy workers and those who had become tutors for the first time that year. The variety made our circle rich. We offer more detail about our circle in Appendix B, The Research-in-practice Circle.

This study is a narrative, told through the eyes of practitioners. Our personal stories of our time with our student(s)³ constitute both our data and our findings. From these stories, interpretations gradually emerge, and from interpretations, we have teased out themes or strands. Our recommendations flow from these themes. Many of these recommendations come from the realization that we are just beginning our exploration. Therefore, as with any research, our discoveries have led to more questions and we hope there will be others to take up the torch. So, in many ways there are two stories told here: why we met and how we worked; what we have uncovered about our relationship with our student.

As participants in the research-in-practice circle, we have found the process enriching, both personally and professionally. We invite you to join us as we describe it in Part 1, The Research Process.

We encourage you to read and reflect upon our stories about practitioners and students in Part 2, Themes. Do these stories ring true to you? Are there areas where tingles set in because we are so “right on;” other areas where your response is “No way --- not me!” This is our intent:: to encourage you to think about your own ideas, feelings, and thoughts about the relationship between practitioner and student. Use our story as your mirror⁴.

³ Although five of our practitioners in this study work with a small group or a class, for purposes of this report, we will omit the plural of student unless the meaning demands it. To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, fictitious names will be used for all students.

⁴ In the body of the report, we will use either “he” or “she” randomly to avoid the awkwardness of using both every time.

Statistics are human beings with the tears erased.

TEARS

Our funders need information that is neat, objectives that are observable, clear goals that can be measured. Funders need to verify that money is well spent and that student progress is being made. However, adult literacy work is messy.

We experience the messiness day after day. A student has had a court appearance and won't be back for at least 6 months. Another has a young son he must baby-sit because his estranged wife needs time off and takes it by dropping her three year old at dad's. A job interview has taken place and there is a chance to get off Ontario Works. An Ontario Works appointment can't be missed, even though it has been explained repeatedly to the worker that literacy classes are in the morning and the student prefers an afternoon appointment. A young student in a small group bursts into tears after yelling at a good friend. She's had no cigarettes for three days now and it is taking its toll. These samples are not just messiness; they are the tears behind the literacy statistics. There is a student voice pleading, "Listen, I am a person too!"

We come together to bare the contents of those tears, with an urgency to convey what we do, to uncover these details for ourselves, our learners, and those who do not yet tutor. We know what we do is not adequately conveyed by the antiseptic transmission of neat numbers. We are often exasperated by the seemingly impenetrable cloak of statistics. Yet we are also excited. Here is an investigative procedure which challenges us to articulate the intangibles. We are not accustomed to thinking about or describing the nature of what we do out loud or on paper.

"Isn't it obvious?" blurts one participant.

A resounding *"no..."* is the immediate response *".... Not even to ourselves."*

Therein lies the immense difficulty. In our early circle sessions we find it almost impossible to express what we so naturally do. We decide, we act and react in our tutoring sessions constantly and continuously, intuitively and sometimes with great artistry, and yet we fail to bring to consciousness what is transpiring. Yet it is the artistry that brings progress and success. We know we need to step back and reflect. The research circle and the journaling together provoke us to uncover that which is obvious.

PART 1

RESEARCH

PROCESS



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The research begins early in September. At our first gathering we meet other participants, become acquainted, learn about the research process, and find out more about our task. This first research-in-practice circle brings a senior researcher from OISE/UT, her research facilitator, our project coordinator (a local practitioner), the project administrator and 12 practitioners together. We hold it in a log home in the country midway between our northern and southern programs.

There is energy and anticipation as well as a good deal of uncertainty about what we can expect. We describe our respective programs, journal a little, but do not share what we have written. We are a group of sixteen. Many of us are meeting each other for the first time. We are not ready to share personal thoughts and ideas.

We hold a brief discussion about students' informed consent and our research expert offers to develop a simple form for students to sign. The form is to include the option for withdrawal at any time as well as the assurance of confidentiality and anonymity. All of us are asked to sign a contract outlining our role and responsibilities as participants. We, too, are given the option of withdrawal at any time⁵. All students but one (part of a small class) sign the consent forms. All those present at the first circle sign the contracts.

Our last task of each session is to comment upon the day's work. In keeping with the nature of the research, we are given only general questions and are urged to be frank in our responses. At the last session, we spend a good part of the afternoon assessing the whole process.

We go away from the first session knowing that we all will journal about what we do with one or perhaps more than one student. But most of us are feeling uneasy about just what these journal entries will include. We are given little direction. It is left deliberately wide open.

Write whatever comes to mind about your tutoring. Include as much as you can about the environment, your feelings, the reactions of your student, the material, the pace. Then reflect upon what you have written.

By the next circle session, held at the end of September, there are some practitioners clamouring for more structure.

Maybe if we have a checklist then we could make sure we haven't left anything out. We will be sure we are doing it correctly.

⁵ For copies of these forms, please see Appendix D

These participants are given time during the session to develop a list of descriptors⁶ which then is given to everyone as a guide for their journal writing. Some are more comfortable with their own journalling format and so continue with it.

In the beginning, the research process is without form or definition, a shapeless lump of clay – even after the introductory training. The approach is new and different and somewhat uncomfortable. It doesn't include a representative sample, present data objectively, nor survey a minimum of at least 100 people. On the contrary, we are to write a personal, intimate account of how we perceive each instructional session. For the first time, we are encouraged to reflect upon each session – what have we done, why, what provoked us to do it, why did it work/not work?

Another circle session is held late in October. In these early sessions we vent – how little time we have to talk about our work – how much more learning we ourselves need – how few of us feel we are being heard - how we think our frustration is characteristic of the whole literacy community. It is not idle talk. Even for one seasoned practitioner the feeling of “*I don't know [enough]*” comes through again and again. We can feel the exasperation in her voice:

I've always read, as long as I can remember – I need to know more about how it works and how I can help my adult student who has such difficulty with reading. What's the point of getting more and more training on assessment if I don't know enough to help my student progress!

Is this perhaps what Stephen D. Brookfield means when he cites the following comment:

Teaching is the educational equivalent of white-water rafting. Periods of apparent calm are interspersed with sudden frenetic turbulence. Boredom alternates with excitement, reflection with action. As we successfully negotiate rapids fraught with danger, we feel a sense of self-confident exhilaration. As we start downstream after capsizing, our self-confidence is shaken and we are awash in self doubt. All teachers sooner or later capsize, and all teachers worth their salt regularly ask themselves whether or not they are doing the right thing. So classrooms are often arenas of confusion where the teachers are gladiators of ambiguity. (Jackson in Brookfield, 1991, p.2)

⁶ For the list of descriptors, see Appendix D.

Sometimes we don't seem to be making any headway with our research, describing the practitioner student relationship; or are we? Is our coming to terms with the research process mirroring the development of our relationship with our student? In both cases, we hesitate. Though we may know the product we are heading for, the path we need to take, the steps involved - the development of insights - are veiled.

So we write in our journals – and though we try to write immediately following a session with our student or small group, for most of us it usually proves to be impossible. A student stays behind to talk, a volunteer wants to discuss something, a meeting or an appointment takes precedence. But we do journal. It may be at one in the morning with pillow and blankets invitingly close, or early in the evening after supper and dishes, but we write. Our early jottings are straightforward and descriptive, and a few are reflective. We question why we do this or that, can we really help our student, are we capable of working with his problems, the challenge that he presents? And what is this journaling supposed to be revealing anyway?

By the end of November's circle session, it is becoming clear that we need to focus more closely on our research topic. Our facilitators develop a chart and include a sample of how it might be filled out in preparation for our next circle in January. For some participants this unlocks the mystery, and that lump of clay begins to take on form. The chart⁷ brings a collective sigh from many of the participants – so this is what we're about! However, there are one or two who find the chart irritating, unhelpful and restricting.

We are encouraged to keep our description in point form, to make the “familiar strange.” We try to faithfully record what is taking place in our tutoring. We use all the artistry, sensitivity, expertise, knowledge and education we can muster to write about each session in our journal. Then we step back. We take a giant step back! We imagine we have never seen or heard of tutoring or teaching. This is all a foreign experience. What are these excerpts revealing? More particularly, what stories are they telling about our relationship with our student? The task of making the familiar strange is a challenging one. It is not a technique which can be explained step by step. We read our jottings again and again, and then we go to a circle session and are exasperated because answers are not forthcoming. We cannot extract strands or themes. Yet we know that we are hearing stories that contain rich and important clues. So we talk some more. We need to be patient and to have confidence that, given time, answers will be there. It is a frustrating technique – and it will take its own time to mature. We have to trust that something will come from the process.

Then there is the last circle session before the report writing begins (February) and we work hard at interpreting excerpts from our journals. Some of us are becoming more comfortable with the process. We work in pairs as well as in groups of three or

⁷ See Appendix D for chart used.

four. We listen to each other. We detail a short tutoring excerpt and then try to make ourselves aware of what is going on and try to express why we moved in this way. It proves to be a very fruitful exchange, even though it is still terribly difficult to figure out why we have acted in a particular way with a student. The others in our small group try to help. They probe for more detail and more explanation: “*What prompted you to say that? Why did you do that? What brought you to reverse your decision?*”

Our next challenge is to develop a report which will convey what we have experienced as well as what we have learned. A report writing committee of six is struck: five participants, the research coordinator and administrator. Because many of the practitioners view the intimacy of the journals as their own personal jottings, at first we agree that journals will not be submitted for purposes of report writing. However, as we contemplate the development of the report, it becomes evident that the stories in our journals are the raw data. And we need an overview of all the data. We ask for the journals to be submitted and all those in the last session readily agree. (Journals are returned after the report is completed.)

All this takes place between September and mid-February. In our session in mid-February we are unanimous. The time span has been much too brief: “*We are just beginning!*” Yet we all agree that journaling has been valuable, not only for this project, but also because it promotes reflection about our students and ourselves as practitioners. Usually our teaching decisions are split-second and follow almost simultaneously upon the heels of other decisions. There is rarely time for considered thought as to why and how we could do our work differently or better. We only share our ideas about tutoring haphazardly - a chance meeting at the local grocery, bumping into each other at a regional workshop. Planned sessions for sharing are rare. We who are the sole practitioners in our program feel the lack even more.

What have we discovered about tutoring and our relationship with our student? We confess that some of us still consider the characteristics below too obvious. But perhaps they are not, for some of what we have discovered runs counter to what we promote in our tutor training and professional development sessions. And perhaps these themes are so assumed that we tend to miss them entirely. If we are right about their importance to the success of our students, we cannot afford to overlook them.

PART 2

OUR THEMES



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A “CERTAIN RAPPORT”

Our relationship with our student is characterized by what we have come to call a “certain rapport.” We struggle to express what we mean and even though we feel it is absolutely critical to our student’s learning, we have great difficulty in defining it. We describe it as involving sensitivity, responsiveness, attentiveness, acceptance, trust and expectations. We feel the term rapport implies that there is a connecting back and forth, not just from tutor to student, but also student to tutor. This dynamic provides us with insights as practitioners and we use these to tutor. As the rapport develops, it is the catalyst that clears the path so that risk taking, so necessary to learning, can begin. The relationship requires care and consistency. Its glue is the emotional connection we have with our student.

We record a great deal about the important role that feelings play in the relationship. Our students often have strong feelings about previous encounters with education. These emotions are so strong that sometimes we record physical reactions. One student divulges the terrible anxiety he felt coming to the first tutoring session.

The first day he came to me after not having been in school since he was 16, he said he threw up before he came.

These reactions are not isolated incidents.

Nerves are so bad [she’s] unable to even write without difficulty.

Our own feelings are also involved when we connect with our student. We rarely actually say, “we care, you can learn this stuff, you can be successful and we will support you until you can.” We do respond sensitively to our student in ways which transmit the message tacitly. This transmission connects our feelings with those of our student. We work to alter our student’s feelings of failure and mistrust of her own capabilities. An effective practitioner senses his student’s exasperation and takes steps to resolve it. The exasperation is neither discounted nor ignored, but the practitioner guides the student so that the next time round, the student realizes the support will be there if needed.

Emotions are involved in a third way. We decide to call it intuition. We try to clarify what we mean by intuition. The dictionary defines it as “the act or faculty of knowing without the use of rational processes” (*The American heritage dictionary, second college edition, 1982, p. 674*). This definition comes close to what we mean because we

are convinced that our tutoring decisions and actions involve more than an intellectual knowing. We make our decisions and take action in ways which are intuitive. We cannot explain rationally why we decided to do what we have done. Many of us end up saying, “I just knew it was the right thing to do.” But it is an intuitive “knowing.” Sometimes we can locate a source – similar past experiences, expertise about teaching. But our grab bag of skills needs a selection process, and it is this process that seems to rely upon our intuition.

Daniel Goleman’s book *Emotional Intelligence* is brought to the report writing committee with some excitement. It may help shed light on our interpretation – why the emotions figure so prominently in our tutoring relationship.

Goleman cites the research of LeDoux to explain how some decisions are made only with the emotional part of our brain, the amygdala. It tells our body to react: fight or flight are our options. Although we as practitioners may not be familiar with this interpretation of why our students react so strongly to new learning challenges, we intuitively seem to be working with our student’s emotions. We believe that until they can view themselves as capable of learning, and that learning need not be a painful series of failures, we can do little to assist them. As long as education is felt as a hurtful, degrading experience, the amygdala will override the rational.

When we read through our journals and meet in our circles, it is evident Goleman could have included many students’ feelings about education as an example of occasions when the amygdala kicks in.

The [student] wants to work alone. If he needs help he will tell me and says that sitting beside him was making him nervous, like a child.

Her level of confidence is so low that any time she makes a mistake she assumes she has messed everything up and doesn’t understand. But she does understand; she just doesn’t believe in herself, so she won’t trust herself to check for the tiny mistakes or the missed step.

It is with some surprise that we come to acknowledge the absolutely critical role of emotions in the relationship. As practitioners we are careful to maintain our professional distance. We fear becoming too involved. Yet many of the stories we are hearing reveal that we are involved. We are “*investing of ourselves*” in our students. We rarely, if ever, speak about it as our commitment, our caring and our feelings for the welfare and progress of our student. We come to realize that this is the unspoken intangible that must be in place if we are to help our students. Goleman’s theory does give us some comfort.

Our emotions guide us in facing predicaments too important to leave to intellect alone – danger, painful loss, persisting towards a goal despite frustrations, bonding with a mate, building a family.... A view of human nature that ignores the power of emotions is “sadly shortsighted.” (Goleman, 1995, p.42)

Another characteristic of this rapport is that it is dynamic. The term “rapport” implies a shifting in intensity and flow from practitioner to student and from student to practitioner.

I think her[student's] attitude keeps me excited and interested in finding new things for her to learn. She is like a sponge just wanting more.

Usually the ones[students] that I appreciate, understand and really want to help are the ones who open up, or present themselves as willing learners.... I do get a kick out of some students – I enjoy the process of helping when I feel that what I've said made a difference.

Without this affirmation, tutoring can become a very frustrating experience.

Arrived at Learning Centre and waited for student. Waited for twenty minutes and student did not show up. Third week in a row. Is this worth it?

We often feel compelled to compensate, to apologize for another's treatment of our student. An administrator snarls at a literacy student, “You are not to be here” (waiting outside the school). We try to tell our student that this administrator is stressed because of constant disruptions to the students inside. The student seems quite unruffled by the incident (perhaps he is more familiar with this sort of treatment than we are willing to admit). A librarian has little time for touring developmentally delayed students around her library. The practitioner takes the students on a thorough tour of an in-house library.

Yet we realize it is not our mandate to solve their problems for them. The act of really listening suffices.

.... I think she enjoys these coffee shop sessions where we can talk about personal matters. I listen and nod and smile. I think people rarely listen to her, and she seems to be pleased that I am attentive, even if I can't offer her solutions to her problems.

I make sure that I don't give my opinion too strongly but rather ask questions for her to ponder. I don't necessarily require answers to those questions, but I just want her to think about certain things.

...And you can't fix it, but you can hear it and that is one thing I think I've really learned in literacy is that you don't have to be Mr. Right, Mr. Fix It. But you can do a lot by hearing and acknowledging their struggles. And accepting that they have them.

Sometimes our students do even better on their own.

Sheila came in and body language told me she was defeated. She had received a letter that said her social assistance was going to be suspended because her school form was not in. She knew we had completed one and remembered giving it to the caseworker who approved it because Sheila had been able to purchase the book with the cheque that followed.

Sheila reported that it was all glossed over—there had been no apology or even explanation. Sheila told the worker that she'd been in business for herself at one time. She sees their system has some serious problems and should be better organized. If their customers weren't forced to use their services, they wouldn't have any customers. She put it far better than I did.

We care – and, according to Judith Michael, it is this emotional involvement that compels us to try to understand --- and in the tutoring situation this translates into caring enough to try to provide effective help.

There is no attempt to understand where there is no love. (Judith Michael, 1994, p.202)

“Love” may seem too strong a term to describe our caring ... and in our society it is too often confused with eroticism. Yet our caring goes beyond the odd dollop of warmth, the occasional reply. It becomes part of the story we are internalizing about our student. It is this continually evolving story that helps us to understand, to act, to persevere.

Sensitivity, Responsiveness and Attentiveness

A successful relationship with our student is bound by a “certain rapport”, an intuitive intelligence. This rapport means we are sensitive, responsive and attentive to our student and our student responds to us. In our best sessions, our whole emotional-intellectual being is involved and so is our student’s. We are making an *emotional* connection, though we do not express it as such.

We try to be totally present, so that we can build on what we have witnessed. Sometimes the signs we pick up are so subtle, they are all but missed:

At least she said “decimals” this time not “math” that she couldn’t do.

I notice that Sharon has taken on a junior leader role in the group. She is very caring, attentive and holds back when clearly she knows the answers, in order that others in the group can join in. She is sensitive to see when a person needs her help, translation, interpretation. For example, when Claire couldn’t remember anything she had done this summer, Sharon tried to prompt her.

And many times the reason underlying our action defies a cognitive explanation.

Jason came to the tutoring session looking very glum. When I tried to get him to open up, he was not communicative. He doesn’t like to talk about his problems. ...I just sit with him for a while

Here is a young student whose personal distress is such that he regularly finds it impossible to remain in a learning situation. He cannot focus, becomes agitated and leaves. He is overwhelmed by his poverty, his debts. He lacks hope and views his future as dismal. The practitioner tries to talk with him, but when he rejects this approach, she seems to realize that he needs to know that she is with him and she displays it with her silent presence. The impact of this superficially simple action is breathtaking. How profound a solution... how does this practitioner know to sit quietly? She readily admits that people in our society usually are very uncomfortable with silence. She cannot explain it. Yet, *intuitively*, she knows. Maybe words will not suffice. And the student remains. Eventually they do some tutoring. Her presence is eloquent: acceptance, acknowledgement of his sadness and misery, trust that he will understand and that she will wait for him. At some level, he must have realized this. He did not flee; he stayed.

One day Allen arrives at class and exuberantly says – “Monday hoise”. I try to interpret this message: “Hoise” means horse. He says he is going on a horse on Monday. What could that mean? Where would there be a horse in his life? I think about the time of the year and ask “A sleigh ride?” He vigorously agrees, pleased that I understand. I know that they have sleigh rides at Pleasant and ask “at Pleasant?” He nods his agreement saying, “Oohh,” which is his method of showing approval. . . . I am glad that he shares, and he is glad that we have been successful in the past. I strain to put my world into his world so that I can understand what he is saying. I stop what I am doing to listen and place it in context. His eyes are twinkling with a joy – about his news and its meaning.

This entry is brimming with the dynamic of communication. The rapport between student and practitioner is almost palpable – the effort of the student to make himself clear, the attempts by the practitioner to step into her student’s world so that she can receive the intended message. There is complete acceptance of this student’s disability. More than that, there is trust that her student has something important and worthwhile to convey – and so she devotes her time and effort in its decoding. Her student is risking yet another failure at communication. The practitioner is risking an incorrect interpretation. They both are engrossed in the excitement of the message. When success is reached, there is delight.

This particular practitioner had told us of another situation with the same student. She captured our attention with the incident – yet it wasn’t until long after her story that we discovered the student communicated primarily with guttural “oohs” and “aahs.” She has worked with this student so sensitively, that she was truly unaware that she had neglected to tell us that his form of communication is so restricted. (He didn’t actually “speak” to her.) He is able to communicate with her – she is able to share his excitement – at least in good part because he has finally made a connection with another person - and she has taken the trouble to make the connection a reality.

These tutoring excerpts may be dramatic, others may be less so, but they are common and each person’s journal has its share. This rapport takes time, but it is not time wasted. It is a vital, integral component, enabling us to help our student learn.

. . . And I brought a few [math] books over and she said “no”. . . . A couple of days later, she sort of looked at one, closed the book, didn’t do anything, hid them for a while. And then they came out again. I think she wanted to do something. I think she was listening to me talk to other students at her particular table. And she looked interested and she looked like she was trying to understand. And she’s very shy. Eventually she started talking and asking questions. That was when I

thought “okay, maybe she’s ready for math.” And when they [the math books] were out this next time, I sat down with her and said, “I noticed your math books are out again. Do you want to try something?” And she said, “yeah, I think I do.” ...So gradually we worked in a little math and then a little bit more... and we’ve come through. She’s in fractions now.

The practitioner readily acknowledged how closely she was monitoring this student, even though this was a class setting. So one of the components of this certain rapport may be the attentiveness with which we watch, listen, and interpret.

The first law of painting – I’m sure writers would say the same thing, about their work – is to take in everything unfiltered, without thinking about order or even meaning. The important thing is to concentrate and absorb. ... But anyone who wants to create must learn to see and hear more than the obvious and the personal. ... So you train your eye and you concentrate, and after a while, under calm surfaces you see other worlds, parallel to the visible one, and far more complex.
(Judith Michael, 1994, p. 256)

Although this excerpt has been taken from a novel which has nothing to do with adult literacy, the insight expressed by the painter seems to capture how many of us proceed. In our tutoring, we try to interpret what actually is meant. “*I couldn’t care less, I don’t have a clue, I’ve never been able to do math, so why would I now...?*” What is my student really telling me?

I really do care --- but I am so afraid that I will fail yet again --- why did I come --- are you sure you can really help me?

Joanne has left me a note from yesterday threatening (yet again) to drop out of the program. In part, she explained she is afraid she has hit a plateau (my words), and (more likely) because my co-instructor had gotten after her for being too loud yesterday (she is loud because she is partly deaf). And she’s afraid of starting algebra.

Bob’s words, “I don’t know what to write”, is not what he means. The thoughts are there in his head but he has trouble getting them out because he can’t spell them. So much energy goes into the spelling that he can’t remember what he wanted to say.

Sensitivity uncovers the clues we need in order to tutor effectively. We move with the student so that we know when to accept the way things are, when to encourage a moving on, when to cajole, push, wait.

I said “stick with what you are comfortable with now.” I didn’t try to show other techniques as yet since this was just our first real sit-down session.... I tried to correct one of her behaviors [procedures] in math. She was steadfast and didn’t want to change. Even after I explained it, she said she did it that way because it was less confusing to her. I remained calm and patient.

We smile, we joke, we gently push, we repeat, we offer bite-size new steps, we question, we repeat, we celebrate small successes, and sometimes we just wait. How do we “know” what to do when?

...teachers make a dazzlingly quick series of judgments about what to do next or how to respond to unforeseen eventualities. These intuitive and immediate judgments are based not on calmly reasoned discussion that occurred months before but on viscerally felt “gut” instincts concerning which actions best fit certain situations. (Calderhead in Brookfield, 1991, p.2)

We connect with our student - often at a gut level. Some of us feel we have had similar life experiences and so we “know” how our student is feeling and trying to manage. We react as we would have wanted someone in our lives to. Some of us briefly step into our student’s shoes. One practitioner quipped we have “vicarious traumas.”

...I have included Roy in the computer class despite his reading problems. He has an excellent memory and doing hands on learning works better for him. As I instruct, I need to constantly remind myself that I must find a way to include him without his reading problems becoming an issue. ... Maybe I should try to remember other techniques I used to help me [when] I couldn’t [see].... I realised what I was doing was identifying words by the height and depth of the letters. ... I would look for visual differences. ... That’s it! I will get him to look at visual differences.

This is practitioner “journal talk.” She searches for a parallel from her own experience with what she believes her student is undergoing. By analyzing her own situation, she has come up with a solution for her student.

It was a big step for my student to accept failure and not be overly concerned ...I find that sharing my own past failures has been a great approach and that when other people share their failures or embarrassments with me, it gives me the confidence to build on my own failures. Sharing failures with students is slippery territory because the point is not to unload your problems on them or to diminish theirs, or to lose credibility with them, but to reveal your failures with the intent and appropriateness of helping people believe they are allowed to fail on their way to better circumstances.

How many of us are willing to try again and again when we have not only tried and failed, but also have often been told that we will never succeed? As practitioners, we need to transform these emotional negatives - with a sensitivity that conveys to our student - “yes, you can!” In the next excerpt the practitioner is careful to mirror the feelings of her student.

You get yourself into the same emotional space so that you can give the right feedback, so that the person feels accepted. The facial expression that I assume is in response to what the student is sending me. So I think one of the really important things is to be totally present with the student.

Sometimes shared laughter, and the release of tension it can bring, opens a wonderful opportunity for learning.

“Marry me” (a suggestion for a note on a Valentine’s card). I said I’d never get one like that – everyone laughed.

They all seemed comfortable and included. They enjoyed the attention and silliness of the Golden Bean award. Good humour and laughter.

My student is delighted when she can “outfrost” me, particularly when it involves getting more homework ready for her because she has managed to complete all of it. It is a bit of a game we have. I remark about how I must again find more work for her! We both laugh.

Sometimes I hear the comment: “I hear those rules in my sleep!” I might make it a joke but the rules are still being mentioned.

Acceptance

Our “certain rapport” clearly involves an attempt to understand our student’s many difficulties. We accept the warts and the wonders.

.... He presents such a sullen personality to the world that I guess people mostly don't bother with him. ... Occasionally I see a tiny crack in his sullenness so I know that it is worth doing.

She does not perform well in unfamiliar situations and even skills she has are put on hold. ... Once the risk of failure was removed she could solve the problem of finding the room number of the resident who had ordered the pizza.

Roslyn plumped up her new Dalmation backpack with great care and set him on the opposite chair like a true participant in our session. Bringing familiar and comforting items to class reinforces her sense of self and provides a conversation starter with other learners who pass by...

I think no matter who comes to me, I give them the benefit of the doubt, that they have some brains and that they're willing to take the risk and I admire them for that....

I feel David is sometimes hampered because he's only willing to look straight ahead instead of trying different things. All black and white and no grey areas. This can be a strong point however, because you can make a goal and stick to it and not be distracted.

But one of the things that she does, almost every week – she has a little cry. In the beginning she used to be really sort of worried about it. She thought that I would be uncomfortable with it. But I just tell her that you know it's okay to cry. Crying releases your frustrations and your tensions ... so go right ahead and have a little cry if you want to.

We take our student’s body, mind, and spirit into account so that if a student is hungry, has come without sleep, or is upset because of a life crisis, we do not tutor about the structure of a complete sentence. We understand when a student explains her absence.

OW and ODSP⁸ payday today. A quiet day. Many students need to do laundry, buy groceries, get to bank, etc.

One student went home early, upset about a custody problem.

Student has so many issues in her life that it interferes with her learning. Her landlord gave her a 3 year lease and now she is about to be evicted.

Her estranged husband comes down to take charge from time to time. However, it seems to me that he is not totally on her side either so when she comes in she is scattered and has difficulty concentrating.

We can feel our student's discomfort and adjust accordingly. We can substitute materials or methods to suit. Our intuition guides our actions and the one-to-one format permits the flexibility.

Susan is good with adding fractions vertically, but when it is horizontal, she begins to quiver. We reorganize it so it is in a form she is familiar with.

Ron had difficulty because he still lacks spelling skills. He wants to use words that are beyond his present level. This seems to prevent a flow of ideas. I am going to have him tell me what he wants to say and I will make notes.

On the computer he is not only on a level playing field with other learners, he actually exceeds them with his newly acquired knowledge. This is important. I will need to work at creating more real life types of exercises, which call for the use of the computer.

When he saw a flashcard with more than one configuration on it, [it didn't help at all]. When I isolated the configurations and used one per card, he was able to remember the solution easily. He came to see that his strong visual learning style is both a strength and a distraction.

We adjust the learning so that the steps are within the student's capabilities. We do as much as possible to ensure success.

⁸ OW = Ontario Works; ODSP = Ontario Disability Support Program

In the beginning, I had taught him that to get a common denominator one could multiply all the denominators together. Now we can work on lowest common denominator.

I think the appealing part is that there is no time element with it. John sits and thinks about it before he makes his next move. He needs to take his time. He does not like to be rushed.

Sharon often had a panic reaction to new learning. So I proceed in very small steps, preparing the environment ahead of time and ensuring Sharon's success. I compliment her on the skills that she already brings to the computer learning (her proof reading and spelling skills).

John's spent many years with a severe stuttering problem. What he had to say was seldom heard. By spending time in a relaxed, supportive environment, John is finding ways for his voice to be heard. As John talks about his feelings, I write things down trying as closely as possible, to use his exact wording. . . . As we work together putting the words in a card format, I am sure to ask, "Does that sound too much like me?" If the answer is yes, then I will say, "Well, let's look at it again then."

This acceptance brings an openness that encourages our students to bring in material of personal interest and we too can tailor our resources and methods to be of particular relevance.

She asked lots of questions about child rearing (she is pregnant). She brought along magazines that have stories for mothers and children.

She thinks her relative is moving to Belize. We looked it up on the internet – weather and other things in Belize. . . . She is seeing a bigger world now.

WHMIS⁹ class was cool. Gave a girl a Health and Safety phone number out of the blue pages after she explained a situation her boyfriend faced at work and was fired over. Have inadvertently presented safety training stuff from a [human] rights angle. . . . This approach seemed to really spark them.

⁹ Workplace Hazardous Material Information System, A Right to Know safety system required by law.

TRUST AND RISK

Our student learns to trust us and we trust in her. With this trust as part of our relationship, we both learn to risk. Trust and risk are often two sides of the same coin. Learning involves risking the unknown, taking a chance on being wrong, confronting yet another challenge. We prove to our student time and time again that we are there to support her, that she can trust us, and we help her to work through a problem until she can solve it on her own. We gauge our student's tolerance for risk and prepare her tasks so that she can experience success. And we help her to understand that doing something wrong is in itself a method of learning. The trust allows both the student and the practitioner to risk.

I told her I wanted her to be the teacher today and give marks... She understood and completed the exercise with great enjoyment, smiles and sense of being in control (after her initial reaction of incredulity).

In the next example, both student and practitioner exhibit the willingness to risk. The rapport and trust is evident.

Today we spent some time shopping for Open House ... I could tell that something was going on for her. She said that she would like to ask a question but she was somewhat wary about bringing it up because it had to do with other students and she knows that's a privacy area. I told her to go ahead and I would have to decide based on the question. ...Due to Phyllis' paranoia [she was concerned that she would be asked to leave the program as well].... I filled in the blanks in the most general and non-threatening way that I could. She agreed [that unacceptable behaviors had led to our asking students to leave the program]... and she said that she understood why we had had to make the decision

There are many, many ways in which trust is given and risk is taken.

I have come to realize that she trusts me more by letting me show and teach her so much more than she ever thought she could learn. It is fun to show her all these new things out in the world... It is like taking someone who has been in a room for all their life and then opening the door and letting them see beyond the room. She is open to learning anything.

Ron and I first had to develop a sense of trust and mutual respect. Even when he is wrong, he knows I will continue to believe in his ability to do it. Because I believe in him so strongly, he tries harder and doesn't give up on himself. When he tries harder, he succeeds more frequently and he develops a more positive image of his capabilities. Because he has a better image of himself, he tries new things.

I [a tutor] think coming here at first was stretching my comfort level and I was uncomfortable, and now it's turned out okay. I think it's a good idea to share things that we've done that have stretched our own comfort level.

One practitioner writes:

Everyone wants to be heard for who they are as they are. The greatest thing we can give our students is to listen to them, see and hear them for who they are and let them know they are important to us. In some cases they have never been important to anyone before. We are not just there to teach and show that we know more than they do, but to care, to listen and teach them through these things that they matter to someone and that we know they will grow and develop.

We use a variety of ways to convey to the student that we will be there for them, and they can trust us. One practitioner remarks:

I am a touchy, feely person and so is my student. So she will touch me on my arm to make a point or establish our connectedness. We will lean towards each other, laugh together, exchange chatter about what the article reminds us of.

Often times she will reach out and touch my arm. We lean towards each other. I comment on her new haircut.

We use swivel chairs so we can both move easily. I really enjoy doing this so I am feeling very relaxed. I try to be particularly aware of my own articulation so I say my words more slowly and definitely. I focus on keeping my voice free of any hint of judgment when he's terribly way off.

Throughout the day we will exchange looks or thumbs up or even if I notice frustration I will go over and sometimes just put my hand on his shoulder, indicating, "you're not alone."

“So when can we have our next computer time?” in a business like tone. She is initiating our next session! This was really impressive to me – that she was now drawing up her weekly schedule... A big step forward!

We risk just as our students do when we ask a question, when we dare to suggest that something can be improved, when we offer to help, when we disagree. There is no doubt about our belief and insistence that the student can learn and will learn. Often we are challenging ourselves as much as our student. We challenge them to think independently – outside of their comfort zone. Often the challenge is sophisticated and complex: using original ideas, thinking abstractly.

If he came up with something different that is not in the text, I would be more impressed than if he repeated all the points in the text.

Maria seems to have trouble getting out of herself to think abstractly and I think that she is quite afraid to examine her own behaviors and motivations. Getting her to think about underlying themes and causes, she is definitely not interested. She wants validation, not solutions.

Risk surfaces in a number of different guises. We agree that coming to a literacy program is a risk for our students.

...Even exposing their needs to us as a tutor, even that is a little bit hard to do. How would we feel? I think I would feel intimidated. And what would you want to tell them? What don't you want to tell them?

It's not only what we say or do, but also what we don't do and say. We're non-judgmental. ... You can tell if someone's judging you even if they don't speak.

Expectations

We have expectations, both for our student and the tutoring. However, often our expectations are extremely conservative. It means we celebrate and get excited about the smallest of steps. Are we afraid to risk the possibility of our student's failure before she is ready? Maybe we think that if our student's experience with learning has been a series of failures, then what we must do is counter that by providing a series of successes.

All my concerns about their coping with the long see-through stairs proved to be more my fear than theirs [fire escape drill with developmentally challenged students].

He handles correction well and seems to take it in. I don't really credit the students and that is my failing. They are all so enthusiastic...

She tries so hard at learning, I am ashamed that I thought she couldn't get to where she is now.

She is doing so well, I'm so happy for her. I must admit, really didn't think she'd take in so much. Wow!

We did some work that we hadn't done for a while. She surprised me when she remembered how to do it. She has grown so much in the last few months.

Then she did some reading. SHE READ A COMPLETE SMALL BOOK. This is the first book. Wow! I was so excited and proud of her. I said I would take her to lunch to celebrate.

There is little in the data to indicate that our expectations for our student increase even though we report many successes. We continue to be extremely cautious. One might think that our expectations would grow as our student proved himself more and more capable. One practitioner asks, "*Is it perhaps because we are responding to possible disabilities and their implications?*" Then why do we persist in building our student's confidence in his ability to learn? There are many unanswered questions here. Further exploration of this topic is certainly warranted.

Often we are shaky ourselves. We ask whether we can supply what we think we should for our student.

How do I keep it fresh, interesting?

*Is it my role to be her life skill's coach? How do I manage expectations?
I don't want to let this girl down.*

As she is growing and learning more I'm starting to feel insecure and we now are getting to a point or at least working towards it where I feel I don't know enough.

I felt lost and didn't know where to start with her. But then, after getting to know her I started to feel a bit more calm, but not completely.

Expectations often stem from societal norms. In our research, the institution of school has ingrained many ideas about what we consider to be academic achievement. It is measured by marks and books completed, evidenced by grades and pieces of paper called diplomas and certificates. There appears to be a strong discrepancy between these conceptions and what we view as progress and success.

Eileen was very insistent that I give her a grade for the first summary. I tried to avoid this, but she half-jokingly said she would not do another one unless I gave her a grade. Finally, I gave her an A and she was pleased. One of her daughters received an 85% for something and I guess she wanted to attach a number or letter to her work as well.

Trisha's grade 11 English final exam results arrived - the incredible mark of 90%! My reaction was "WHAT WAS GOING ON HERE?...Trisha had mixed feelings about her marks. She was happy to have her work marked this high but she questioned its validity. She recalled not understanding most of the questions (which is true, she didn't) and she was sure she had misspelled lots of words (also true). She was happy about being able to write a full page to answer a question on the exam, which she stated, is the first time she's ever done that. I have convinced her that she needs more practice in reading and understanding material, especially questions with several parts, so we are doing that now.

PROCESS INDICATORS: PROOF OF STUDENT PROGRESS

Our concept of student progress emerges quite naturally from what we talk about in our circle sessions and what we record in our journals. We focus on encouraging our student to realize that learning is possible, and more than that, that she can be successful at it. The journey we take together has steps along the way. We view these steps as progress. We are defining the term broadly. If we look for academic outcomes as the only criteria for determining if a session has been productive, within the dynamic of the student/practitioner relationship, it is too limiting. As the only indicators of success, academic outcomes do not sit comfortably. Yet some are concerned that if we deal with topics other than academic, we are really not tutoring; we may be wasting time. This is not to say that recognition of academic achievement has no value. But, as an overall evaluation of tutoring and learning, it is misleading. We do so much more!

We view learning as a lifelong process, and we believe it is critical that our students feel they can succeed at it. However, we have come to realize that in many cases, the feelings toward learning are tentative at best, often negative. Therefore, when we witness signs that these feelings are shifting for the better, we think of our student as making progress.

She wanted to check her own answers for the first few weeks, embarrassed at her mistakes. "I should know this!" She asks for help now and doesn't mind being corrected.

The student thought about it all night and told me, "let's get at this story. I've got a great idea." This is coming from a student for whom creative writing was like pulling teeth!

When students begin to reach out to support each other, we realize there has been a breakthrough toward self-confidence.

He made a wonderful compliment on how she had improved in grammar. This is so important because he was very nervous when first coming to the centre.

Producing their own brochure was a great opportunity to see how the learners' problem solving skills had developed. Everyone helped each other and the ones strong on computers were able to help the others.

I notice people are using the board more to figure out math problems. Is this helping them? It seems to. I notice they are a great mix, a great group, private and social, friendly, welcoming to newcomers.

We routinely question students about short and long-term goals, what work or further education they hope to do when they first come to a program. Many students cannot even begin to imagine that far into the future. As one practitioner put it,

...but this “future” is not something that all relate to easily. Some have that “future planning” skill more than others...now is concrete—later is a concept—It involves anticipation and abstract planning.

Another practitioner comments,

The moment I tried to explore with her the idea of going to college I saw panic in her eyes...the idea of going to college was so frightening to her.

It is not surprising then, that there is sometimes a discrepancy between our student’s listed goals on intake forms and what he tells us when he comes to trust us. Training plans are created according to the goals listed on intake forms, which serve as a direction for the tutoring. Academic resources are chosen and revolve around achieving a well-defined outcome. When the student has no discernible goal at all, the goal then becomes to identify one. Yet, even this tends to ignore the steps often needed to gain the confidence to say “ yes, I really want to ...” because hovering in the background is – “but I never thought I’d be able to!”

One practitioner notes,

I still think that once you have awakened the student’s interest, you will see them grow beyond your first thoughts. He sure has.

Another practitioner is doubtful:

Occasionally I wonder how to proceed to achieve the student’s goals. I find myself wondering how I can help this woman progress.

Much of their tutoring session is devoted to conversation (improving speaking and listening skills) since her student is from another country where English is not the

native tongue. Even though conversation is essential to learning a new language, still there is this nagging doubt that somehow the student's goals are not being met. She wonders whether they are being productive just sitting there talking? The practitioner begins to question her confidence in her abilities and her approach. Is any learning taking place? Is this valuable? Is it productive?

Many problems with discerning whether a session is productive or not revolve around the question of having to deal with life issues. If more time is spent on dealing with a student's life issues, is learning taking place? Were her goals being met by talking about personal matters?

Poverty, job related stresses, depression, anxiety attacks, poor physical health, pregnancy, loss of income or home, issues of custody, personal relationships; the list only scratches the surface. These are all stressful situations for any adult to face. Many of these problems are especially difficult to cope with if essential skills are lacking; confidence is low. Setbacks are inevitable. Issues of survival are the main concern, and just getting through the day is the priority for many. Is it realistic to try to separate these issues from the task at hand - learning?

Fellow classmates are sometimes affected by the black mood of a student. As one practitioner comments,

When one student or person is going through a difficult time it has an effect on all the other learners.

Other issues reflect attitudes that are self defeating but so thoroughly embedded it takes a tremendous amount of time and effort to get beyond the barrier. We are often facing a dilemma of sorts. A practitioner journals,

How can I balance her need to express herself about her personal life issues and her need to see herself as a person who is making progress in literacy skills?

Intertwined so tightly, it is impossible to separate a student's life issues from academic learning:

She keeps going back to personal issues and then I have a lot of difficulty getting her back to the material in the text book.

You must be encouraged and feel good about yourself before you really understand the purpose of future education.

In our last circle session, we list our indicators of student progress. It came as no surprise to us that many items refer to evidence of a shift in feelings toward learning. Note the number of processes in the list below. Importantly, almost all are observable indicators.

- **Students' vocabulary starts to change:**
 - They begin to say things like “*What's next?*” or “*I understand?*”.
 - They become less hostile and no longer say, “*I'm confused?*” most of the time.
 - They aren't constantly asking, “*Is this okay?*”
 - They verbalize the process as they work through a problem.

- **Students' body language changes.**
 - Body language shifts from being closed to opening up, sitting back and taking things in more.
 - Eye contact increases.

- **Students begin to work independently.**
 - They assess their own work.
 - They question.
 - They want to work without assistance.
 - They are accepting their role and responsibilities

- **Students are not as embarrassed by their mistakes.**
 - They don't mind being corrected now.

- **Students actively help others.**
 - They begin to explain concepts to another learner.
 - They go out of their way to make others feel comfortable.
 - They compliment others and are more aware of the needs and wants of others.
 - They encourage or participate in group discussions.

- **Students indicate they want to learn more.**
 - They want the tutoring sessions to last longer.
 - Their energy levels and the energy present in the session increases.
 - They want to try new things.
 - They go beyond what is being asked —anticipate tasks and see what needs to be done.

- **Students apply things learned academically to real life.**
One student forgot he could read; dumped some coins into the car wash; then he realised he could read and had put in wrong coins .
The student is getting a library membership

- **Students know now they have the power to implement change in their lives.**
A student brings out his weekly scheduler and asks me when I would like to see him next, indicating what days and times he is free.
She comes in saying, *“Let’s get going. I thought of a great topic for writing.”*

Many of these progress indicators are critical to the success of any learning situation. It is important that we acknowledge these successes and that our students receive recognition for their achievement. It is in these ways that literacy tutoring provides the foundation for further learning.

FINALE



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CONCLUSIONS

About Research Process

Those who completed the final evaluation of the research-in-practice circle agreed that the experience was valuable and enriching, both personally and professionally. Even though we were journaling about our tutoring, the nature of the process remained intimate and encouraged a free flow of thoughts and questions. The reflection and interpretation promoted insightful sharing among practitioners. We found the circles gave rise to the discovery that what we routinely do as practitioners rarely is given the significance it is due. It is often because we are unaware of its value ourselves. We certainly do not talk about it with our colleagues. Although we find it difficult to articulate, we have come to honor the skills and artistry involved in tutoring. This proves to be wonderful affirmation, particularly for those who work in isolated programs.

Participants also appreciated the support from OISE/UT and thought that the potential for helping practitioners in adult literacy to become expert, sensitive researchers was increased by their assistance.

All agreed that the project was much too brief. It took time to absorb and apply the research approach and methodology. The very nature of the methodology required time to focus upon the stories fruitful for interpretation of our relationships. When we finally helped each other interpret our stories, we had already completed the journaling section of the project. However, the way in which the indicators of student progress emerged so easily pointed to the important contribution this methodology, once learned, could make to the field.

It is useful to point out that we were learning the research methodology *because* we had an important issue we wanted to investigate. This strategy reflects good adult pedagogy. The research process was the tool we needed. We were motivated to become comfortable with it because we were seeking answers to a question which greatly concerned us: what goes on in the practitioner-student relationship. Although sometimes we found it challenging to do two things at once (learn a research technique and use it to investigate the relationship between practitioner and student), we think this facilitated our development as researchers.

We recommend both the journaling and the sharing that the research-in-practice circle can bring to the development of the field. We believe that the literacy community can benefit significantly by their use.

About Themes

The emergence of the theme a “certain rapport” and our description of it is central to our interpretation of what goes on in the relationship between practitioner and student. Our student comes to a literacy program because he knows that he needs to improve his basic skills if he is to function successfully in our current western world. Others may tell him that he can gain entrance to post-secondary studies or a good job only if he upgrades. His intellect tells him that he should come. However, continued attendance in the literacy program often hinges upon overcoming emotional barriers, powerful negative feelings toward formal education. Sometimes even initial enrolment in a program is too difficult. Once he does begin to attend, we have found that it is absolutely critical that a “certain rapport” between practitioner and student is established so that the practitioner can act and react sensitively and responsively to the student, and so the student can gradually become more confident. He discovers he is capable. He might even have the potential to succeed academically.

The critical importance of the emotions is at the core of our research and most of our entries. Goleman’s theory gives us a rationale for what we as practitioners intuitively do. We are trying to establish a new pathway in the brain, one that includes the intellect along with the emotions in the decision-making process, particularly as it relates to academic learning. If this is in fact the case, then much of what we as practitioners perceive as progress makes good sense. We are looking for evidence that solely negative emotional reactions to academic matters have been overcome; the rational, thoughtful mind is beginning to contribute to decisions about whether to accept and pursue academic challenges.

About Indicators of Student Progress

Perhaps when progress toward current ministry outcomes is disappointing, or when a study indicates that literacy students are not meeting intended workplace goals of a better job or full-time employment, it may be because these are not really the primary goals of literacy tutoring. Perhaps we are working hard at altering negative emotional knee jerk reactions to academic learning (something akin to what Goleman terms “emotional intelligence”, and, in fact, until we realize these changes we may not be able to witness much progress academically. Therefore, our indicators of student progress can be viewed as evidence that the fundamentals necessary for learning to occur are in place.

If our students are to succeed academically, we must honour the time it takes to alter their attitudes toward their own potential. We need to be sensitive to their multiple responsibilities and life problems that sometimes take precedence. As literacy practitioners, we understand our students’ disruptions and acknowledge that academic progress may be slowed because other problems interfere.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- We use research-in-practice circles as vehicles for professional development.
- We encourage practitioners to journal regularly and share their material.

In the exchange of information and ideas during these all too few meetings, practitioners realized the potential for their own growth. We tend to ignore our own skills and expertise. Regular research-in-practice circles would encourage the exchange of ideas, the focus on solutions contributing to continuous improvement of the field.

Traditionally our professional development sessions tend to be top down; that is, we routinely attend workshops in which individuals or teams present material which we are to absorb. Depending on the topic, this approach, of course, is warranted. However, during this research project we discovered that there is a richness of material within each practitioner and that it is valuable. Some materials provide questions and these bear fruit in a practitioner group; some provide wonderful ways of coping, solving common problems and tutoring challenges. In the throes of the day to day melee, we rarely, if ever, take time to share. Moreover, for those of us in isolated areas where we may be the sole practitioner, the opportunity to share comes only when we meet with practitioners from other programs. And then this is customarily to discuss administrative affairs.

When the opportunity to share is given, particularly when we have had the time to journal and reflect, the rewards are tremendous. The journalling process preceding a session compels each of us not only to record what may seem commonplace, but also to reflect upon it. What a wonderful way to develop as practitioners!

- We consider time for reflection as an integral part of our preparation for tutoring.

Evaluation of the research project by participants included remarks about the importance of payment for what was done. In our society, we are willing to pay for items, products or information we deem worthy. This verification of the value of our project was important to those who participated. In addition, in very practical terms, the payment made it possible for a program practitioner to arrange for replacement when she had to be absent.

- We talk about and assist practitioners to develop that critical “certain rapport.” We include it in tutor training and practitioner professional development.

The participants in this research project came to realize the critical significance of the rapport which is developed between student and tutor. It is rarely, if ever, acknowledged in our training sessions and somehow is neglected entirely in any professional development. Perhaps it is because it is assumed and so obvious, and often dependent upon our own sensitivity and intuition. Yet if we are to accept Goleman’s refrain about the critical importance of emotional intelligence, the need for addressing this “certain rapport” is great.

- We include process indicators as evidence of student progress.

Policy makers use a booklet of outcomes which focuses primarily on academic indicators. Our research points to additional important indicators of success. These are as easily determined as many of the academic ones. For example, if practitioners were to record a student’s outlook when he first begins the one-to-one situation and then, after rapport is established, assessment of change would easily provide the indicators of progress.

This defence of the critical importance of the emotions may be at the heart of our research and many of our entries. Goleman’s theory gives us a rationale for what we as practitioners intuitively try to do. In Goleman’s terms, we are attempting to short circuit the pathway that leads directly to the flight or fight response (amygdala) and repave the process so that it involves the intellect. (See page ____ for explanation of Goleman’s terms.) If this is in fact the case, then much of what we as practitioners perceive as progress makes sense.

For example, we talk about how we celebrate a student’s remark “*what’s next?*” because to us it signals “*I’m willing to risk.*” If we view this comment from Goleman’s point of view, the limbic system with its route straight to the amygdala which brings the reaction “*Don’t risk. You’ll fail and it will hurt*” has been successfully bypassed. The practitioner celebrates this as evidence of great progress made by her student.

Perhaps then when progress toward current ministry outcomes is disappointing, or when a study indicates that literacy students are not meeting intended workplace goals of a better job or full-time employment, it may be because we have not adequately identified indicators of student progress. Perhaps we are working hard at something akin to what Goleman terms “emotional intelligence”, and in fact, until we bring this development to an acceptable level, we may not be able to witness much progress academically.

- **We honour the time needed for students to gain confidence in their own potential for learning.**

We recognize that our students rarely come with “only” literacy problems. The nature of these other problems is often so fundamental to a student’s survival that it is a barrier to learning. The task literacy practitioners set out for themselves is not an easy one, nor is it accomplished instantly. The journal records show that altering an attitude often takes months and years, even with numerous supports in place. Students need time to change. Once this occurs, success often proceeds much more rapidly.

- **We realize that literacy skills really are the first step, the foundation for further learning.**

Adults come to literacy programs to learn reading, writing, numeracy and basic computer skills because they see these skills as the key to a better life. Since many of our students have average or better than average intelligence, we expect that they should be able to accomplish their learning goals. We are surprised when the student experiences difficulties in achieving his goals and we wonder what the problem is.

In this study, we have become aware of the emotions that permeate all learning. When our emotions support the learning activity, success is likely, and when they don’t, the outcome is doubtful. For example, if our student wants to get her driver’s license, she will be more likely to succeed if she is eager to be independent. She will do well if she believes that driving is a normal activity that she can master as others have done. However, if she has been told repeatedly that she has a disability which will make it difficult, if not impossible, for her to drive, she may be afraid to take up the challenge. If she has experienced a car accident, she may see a car as dangerous. The emotions from past experiences exert a powerful influence.

When we come to know our students and learn about their life experiences, we often find out they have had negative learning experiences both in and out of school. Family members and peers may have ridiculed them for being clumsy or for having difficulty with reading. Teachers may have been insensitive to their learning challenges and labeled them as lazy or uncooperative. As children they could usually see that their work did not compare favourably with that of their peers. Frequently, family and personal problems exacerbated their learning problems and so the individuals blamed themselves for acting out to alleviate their distress. When people experience failure again and again, they lose confidence in their ability to succeed and eventually stop trying. They begin to believe they are stupid and refuse to take risks for fear of further humiliation.

These people come to literacy programs because they know literacy skills are important. Unfortunately, they bear the burden of negative experiences that need to be mitigated before they can see themselves as successful academically. Practitioners find that their first job is to help their students regain their confidence. Then, in a safe environment, the student can learn to take risks and experience success. Since the damage to our student's self-confidence has happened over a long period of time, it takes time to repair. The first job of the practitioner is to help rebuild that confidence.

What is clear to us is that for most of our students, attending a literacy program is an initial - and risky - step. If this initial test is successful, then they are willing to risk more. However, we are dealing with the foundation, the basics, and in our current technological world, the basics are a mere baby step on the path to the expertise and skills needed to work and live successfully today. We do not ask infants to tell us what their life work will be. (Yes, there are child prodigies, but most of us do not fall into this category.) Why do we expect this of our literacy students?

For Further Study

As usual, our research resulted in more questions. We suggest that these questions warrant study.

- **How do students view the student-practitioner relationship? What is going on in the relationship that makes it work from their perspective?**

This study is an initial step and has been limited to viewing the topic from the practitioner's vantage point. We realize that it is critical to explore the relationship from the perspective of the other partner in the relationship – the student. We recommend that the study be carefully designed so that students are encouraged to reflect, discuss, and express themselves. For many of our students these are the very challenges which have brought them to literacy programs. We believe their ideas and opinions about the relationship will provide valuable insights and should not be overlooked.

- **How do we assist current and prospective practitioners to develop a “certain rapport”?**

We assume that people who are attracted to tutoring already possess a sensitivity to others. It should be possible, then, to develop professional development materials

that will enhance this natural tendency to facilitate a connection between tutor and student. At the same time we should be aware of the fine line between inviting practitioners to make the emotional commitment and the potential for misinterpretation concerning practitioners' personal involvement with their students. Since that "certain rapport" deals with the emotions, experiential techniques of professional development might be useful. For example, tutor training could include observation of a tutoring session. A more experienced tutor or practitioner could sit in on a novice's initial few sessions and offer feedback.

- **What do practitioners and students mean by some common terms: learning, education, reading, assessment? Are there differences in concepts?**

How do we ensure quality service delivery if there is no common understanding of these terms? Although our research did not deal directly with this issue, the discrepancies in meaning were brought to the circle because these differences tend to have an impact upon our relationship. For example, if a student views learning as working through as many workbooks as possible, and the practitioner insists on comprehension, thereby slowing down the process, the tension which arises challenges the relationship and learning. An investigation of these discrepancies would undoubtedly come to deal with ways and means for solving such situations.

- **How does a practitioner's own views about what he finds personally important to his own learning influence the tutoring situation?**

This research project touched only superficially upon the congruence between a practitioner's personal experiences with learning and what she considered important to her tutoring. However, more research may point to the way in which this information can enhance a successful match between practitioner and student.

One aspect of this research study was the interviewing of all but two of the practitioner participants. While the original intent was to be able to paint the picture of the variety of personalities that are tutoring, one of the findings that emerged was that an individual's early learning experience greatly influenced what he thought important to provide for his student. For example, one practitioner said of her teachers, "*they didn't expect anything of me and they were boring.*" She said they didn't even try to interest her. She interpreted this as meaning they didn't really care about her. Therefore, she takes a great deal of time and effort to personalize her tutoring to fit the student she is with, including expectations concerning what will be achieved. Another practitioner wrote about her grandfather's willingness to listen to her and to answer all her questions, even when he may have been exhausted, having just returned from heavy work and long hours. He encouraged her to question. She interpreted this as respect given her and her queries. Every question deserved the

best answer he could give. She speaks of the respect she has for her students and the questions she encourages.

This falling back upon our own personal learning experiences is not particularly unusual. However, it does have implications for matching practitioner and student. If practitioners generally refer to their own learning to find answers for what they will do in their tutoring, there are certainly implications for a screening and matching process. Also, one might question why few participants interviewed mentioned how their tutor training guided them. Are these two findings related? Perhaps as practitioners we fall back on our own learning experiences because other problem solving sources have not been well enough established. For example, our tutor training may not be “scratching where it itches,” as one of our practitioners pointed out.

➤ **How do we include progress indicators as evidence of student progress?**

The list of progress indicators includes a number of observable pieces of evidence. Further study is needed to verify and elaborate upon these items. If the items are corroborated, it is important that we incorporate these indicators into our outcomes. They substantiate what we do as practitioners and give our students evidence that they are indeed making progress. Funders will be assured that monies are being well spent.

Our study tells us that we must change a student’s negative outlook about his potential for academic success. Unless we do this, it is doubtful that we will be able to assist our student.

If literacy is the first of many steps, longitudinal studies following students’ progress after successful literacy study, will be significant. There are many questions that surface. What are the next steps students take? How do they make the decisions about their next steps? What supports do these next steps require? What life issues are there which relate to our students’ ability to pursue their next steps? How successful are these students in achieving their next steps?

You, our reader, may have other suggestions for further study. You may have your own questions about how this study impacts upon your literacy work. We encourage you to reflect upon your ideas and discuss them with others. This process of asking and reflecting is one which has served us well. We urge you to join us!

Epilogue



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THIS IS WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

We are a group of literacy practitioners, both paid and volunteer, who have discovered a great deal about our tutoring from journalling, reflecting and sharing. The support and expertise given to us from staff at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto facilitated our work as researchers. Most of us had never been involved with research before. We met six times as a research-in-practice circle from September to February. We told our tutoring stories and read from our journals. We found the circles gave rise to the discovery that what we often routinely do as practitioners rarely is given the significance it is due. It is usually because we are unaware of its value ourselves. In our research-in-practice circle, we came to recognize the skills and artistry involved in tutoring.

We have learned that our emotions are involved in our tutoring, that we invest of ourselves in our students and develop a “certain rapport.” The rapport is characterized by sensitivity, attentiveness, responsiveness, acceptance, and trust. It is dynamic; it flows from practitioner to student and student to practitioner. When rapport is successful, it allows our students to risk in a safe environment. Without risk, there is little learning.

We have learned that our students’ emotions figure significantly in their ability to learn and that often they have negative reactions about their potential for academic achievement. We have learned that once we help our students to alter their attitudes about their potential, we can also help them to achieve academically. From the research process, we have been able to clarify what we mean by student progress and list a number of indicators of that progress.

Appendix A: Emotional Intelligence

... I really didn't see anything clearly. I saw what I expected to see.... What I expected. Everyone does that, you know; ... people arrange reality to fit their expectations and they'll go through all sorts of contortions to make the world seem logical rather than take something seriously that doesn't make sense at all. (Judith Michael, 1994, p.397).

Our search of the literature led us to a rereading of portions of the book by Daniel Goleman entitled *Emotional Intelligence* (1995). The discoveries he cites have important implications for our tutoring. He contends that emotional intelligence, a way of knowing, can “matter more than IQ.” He defines emotional intelligence as:

abilities such as being able to motivate oneself and persist in the face of frustrations; to control impulse and delay gratification; to regulate one's moods and keep distress from swamping the ability to think; to empathize and to hope. (Goleman, 1995, p.34)

He views the education of our emotions as critical to an individual's success in life, perhaps even more so than a high IQ. At present he contends we leave the emotional education of our children to chance, with ever more disastrous results. One solution is a new vision of what schools can do to educate the whole student, bringing together mind and heart in the classroom.

It is with the heart that one sees rightly, what is essential is invisible to the eye. (Saint-Exupery, 1943, p.3)

Goleman provides us with a detailed rationale:

As we all know from experience, when it comes to shaping our decisions and our actions, feeling counts every bit as much – and often more – than thought (Goleman, 1995, p.4).

His explanation of how we decide and act is detailed and he supports it with citations from scientific experiments.

Sensory signals from eye or ear travel first in the brain to the thalamus, and then – across a single synapse – to the amygdala; a second signal from the thalamus is routed to the neocortex – the thinking brain. This branching allows the amygdala to begin to respond before the neocortex, which mulls information through several levels of brain circuits before it fully perceives and finally initiates its more finely tailored response.

It is in moments when impulsive feeling overrides rational – that the newly discovered role for the amygdala is pivotal. Incoming signals from the senses let the amygdala scan every experience for trouble. This puts the amygdala in a powerful post in mental life, something like a psychological sentinel, challenging every situation, every perception with but one kind of question in mind, the most primitive - “Is this something I hate? That hurts me? Something I fear?” If so – if the moment at hand somehow draws a “yes” – amygdala reacts instantaneously, like a neural tripwire, telegraphing a message of crisis to all parts of the brain.

In a very real sense we have two minds, one that thinks and one that feels... Ordinarily there is a balance between emotional and rational minds, with emotion feeding into and informing the operations of the rational mind and the rational mind refining and sometimes vetoing the inputs of the emotions. Still, the emotional and rational minds are semi-independent faculties....

The emotional areas are intertwined via myriad connecting circuits to all parts of the neocortex (centre for thought). This gives the emotional centers immense power to influence the functioning of the rest of the brain...

LeDoux’s research explains how the amygdala (limbic or emotional part of the brain) can take control over what we do even as the thinking brain, the neocortex is still coming to a decision.

LeDoux’s research is revolutionary for understanding emotional life because it is the first to work out neural pathways for feelings that bypass the neocortex. Those feelings that take the direct route through the amygdala include our most primitive and potent: this circuit does much to explain the power of emotion to overwhelm rationality.

The amygdala can house the memories and response repertoires that we enact without quite realizing why we do so because the shortcut from thalamus to amygdala completely bypasses the neocortex. This bypass seems to allow the amygdala to be a repository for emotional impressions and memories that we have never known about in full awareness.

One drawback of such neural alarms is that the urgent message the amygdala sends is sometimes, if not often, out of date – especially in the fluid social world we humans inhabit. As the repository for emotional memory, the amygdala scans experience, comparing what is happening now with what happened in the past. Its method of comparison is associative: when one key element of a present situation is similar to the past, it can call it a “match” – which is why this circuit is sloppy: it acts before there is full confirmation. It frantically commands that we react to the present in ways that were imprinted long ago, with thoughts, emotions, reactions learned in response to events perhaps only dimly similar, but close enough to alarm the amygdala. ...

The trouble is that along with the emotionally charged memories that have the power to trigger this crisis response can come equally outdated ways of responding to it.

The emotional brain’s imprecision in such moments is added to by the fact that many potent emotional memories date from the first few years of life, in the relationship between an infant and its caretakers. This is especially true for traumatic events, like beatings or outright neglect.

... These [earliest of] emotional lessons are so potent and so difficult to understand from the vantage point of adult life because, ... they are stored in the amygdala as rough wordless blueprints for emotional life.

One reason we can be so baffled by our emotional outbursts, then, is that they often date from the time early in our lives where ... we did not yet have words for comprehending events. We may have the chaotic feelings, but not the words for the memories that formed them. (Goleman, 1995, pp 9 -22)

Training packages intended for development of emotional intelligence are flourishing. The discovery of emotional IQ has become a popular concept. We are *not* using it because it has gained popularity. We encourage the field to explore this theory as it relates to our students. We really supply only hints of the theory’s potential as a rationale for what transpires in the student practitioner relationship.

Appendix B

The Research-in-Practice Circle

The research circle included 13 practitioners, one research co-ordinator (also a practitioner), one administrator, one research expert and one research facilitator from Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). Five programs were represented initially: Trent Valley Literacy Association (6) one of these six was also representing a school board literacy program; Peterborough Native Learning Program (2), Lovesick Lake Native Women's Association (2); Haliburton Highlands Learning Program(2); and Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board LBS (2). All participants were paid to journal for a 1 and ½ hours each week from September to the end of January and were paid to attend circles, also receiving mileage where appropriate.

Our research-in-practice circle was unusually large. Our research experts from OISE/UT assured us people would fall away, and this was normal for a research group. Surprisingly, the group remained intact except for two participants. The size of the group brought its own challenges. It may have contributed to the discomfort about sharing initially. Small groups as well as working in pairs were strategies that seemed to help. However, the diversity and variety of experience that characterized the circle brought its own dynamic. Often an idea would benefit by being viewed from different perspectives. Moreover, one practitioner commented: *"It gave me some insight into how students stepping into a literacy centre for the first time must feel."*

Informed consent was discussed briefly at our first circle. Our research expert from OISE/UT contributed a suitable form so that we could describe the project to students whose practitioners were interested in becoming part of the project. All students, except for one in a class setting, signed the form. Anonymity was ensured. In addition, practitioners all agreed that whatever was discussed at circles would remain confidential. The forms which students signed also made it clear that they could withdraw their consent at any time. A copy of the form is included in Appendix D. Practitioners who agreed to participate signed a contract. The contract made it clear that they could withdraw at any time. A copy of the contract is included in Appendix D.

One [practitioner and one volunteer from the same community program withdrew from the research. The volunteer cited reasons related to what she considered to be invalid methods of research, having come from a quantitative research background and unfortunately missing the initial training on the qualitative narrative approach. She attended only one circle before withdrawing from the research and asking that her name be withdrawn from the project. This was done. The practitioner withdrew

because she didn't think she was retrieving information that would be useful for her students. However, we continued to e-mail back and forth after that and she voluntarily sent in her journaling excerpts, two of which have been included in this study. The other participants persisted, although one was unable to attend the final two circles. The rest attended, journalled and submitted their journals. The two final circles were most fruitful with respect to interpreting journal material so that themes would emerge. In the last circle small groups actually focussed on the attributes of "emotional rapport, trust, acceptance and risk." Many found these characteristics to be so closely linked that when one was being discussed, the others surfaced as well.

At the end of each circle, participants were asked to evaluate the day. After the final circle, participants first discussed the methods used (the journaling, the research circle), and then were asked to write an evaluation of the whole process. The written evaluation could be submitted anonymously and some did decide to do so.

A small report writing committee was struck and a session was conducted in which a suggested format and ideas for content were discussed. Then a systematic coding of journals took place. Entries were coded according to topics discussed in the focus groups: emotional rapport, acceptance, trust, risk. Additional topics were listed as they surfaced. (For example, we came to include the topic of "relevance"). Journal excerpts were entered onto the computer according to their coding. If an excerpt had been coded "trust", it became part of the "trust coding sheet." Further discussion with two other members of the report writing committee resulted in a collapsing of some categories and reinterpretation of the term emotional rapport. The coordinator then read other sources of data (e.g. the charts, the evaluations, the interviews, the minutes of the circles) and produced a first draft report, interpreting all the data. Two meetings of the report writing committee followed with suggestions for revisions integrated each time. For the third draft, the report writing committee was asked to submit revisions via e-mail or phone. Then the revised draft went out to all research participants for comment and suggestions in a final circle in late June.

Consensus was that the journaling was valuable and compelled reflection which is too often absent when in the throes of tutoring. The circles were worthwhile for exchanges of information and ideas about tutoring and teaching and although at the beginning, there were many comments about how rare this opportunity to talk and exchange ideas was among practitioners, there was no real resolution of how this could continue, particularly if there was no financial support to do so. All agreed that the process was much too brief. It felt as though we were just beginning our exploration.

We now realize that it takes time to become comfortable with the research technique. The flexibility and openness of the methodology can be extremely frustrating, particularly for those seeking structure. Yet some of us believe it is this

lack of structure which enables us to admit ideas and details that can be overlooked in a structured research format. It allows each participant to record what strikes her as significant. Another may report something entirely different. However, the commonalities that we extract from our stories provide us with our themes. We believe we have discovered something of importance. We hope others will too.

Appendix C

Our Use of the Literature

In our research circle meetings, we discussed ideas and shared our journal material. Participants within the circle commented upon the mass of print materials that crossed their desks every day and the impossibility of reading it. While volunteer tutors hear about new reports or materials only infrequently in newsletters or during initial tutor training, paid practitioners find they have little time to read and absorb the information. Often a report can pass from one “to do” pile to another and no one has time to dip into it. Time in literacy is taken up with students. There is little time for journal writing, let alone reading.

It soon became quite clear that any search of the literature would be my responsibility as research coordinator. Since I had no involvement with literacy work other than the research project from late September on, I was free to devote some time to reading related literature. Alpha Plus conducted the search and produced about 5 pages of titles. The research administrator and I selected from the list. These books were supplemented by others along the way that I thought also contributed to our topic.

In all, there really were two types of literature used in the project. One relates to the research methodology, the other to our topic of investigation. After our initial training session, we were encouraged to read Mary Norton’s *A traveler’s guide to literacy research in practice* and to use it as our research reference. It is a brief, clear and useful guide for newcomers. During the first few months of the project I read through the books sent by Alpha Plus. I presented tidbits from these at research circle sessions. *When tutor meets student* for example, provided some excellent excerpts because in one instance at least we had the opportunity to glimpse not only the interchange between tutor and student, but also what the tutor was thinking. I sometimes used these readings to set an environment (laughter dissipated what could be a tense situation) or to provoke discussion. You will see some of these very excerpts in the report above. While I did not use quotations from all I read, (e.g. *Learner’s Choice*, or *Creating environments for effective adult learning*), these little books helped me to think about our topic and to look at it from different vantage points and then share these differing points of view.

Other material that was familiar to literacy practitioners sometimes entered into the discussion. For example, Pat Campbell’s book on reading was described and subsequently brought to the next circle because one participant voiced concern about not knowing enough about helping adult students read. Another booklet,

Writing out loud by Deborah Morgan, was used when we discuss the tenor of our anticipated report. We wanted it to speak to readers the way her book did. It gave us the courage to proceed with the intimacy of her report.

Sometimes a book I was reading purely for pleasure (e.g. *A tangled web*) had excerpts which jumped out. Even though they referred to matters other than literacy tutoring, they spoke eloquently about our concerns.

A few publications were interesting though perhaps not of direct significance to our report. *Naming the magic* and *Dancing in the dark* used similar research techniques and so were interesting from that point of view. *Literacy for women on the streets*, while not directly pertinent to our topic, set some of us reflecting upon our own students who, although not women on the streets, often seem just as needy. In early February a study from England, *Adult Literacy Policy*, added grist to the interpretive mill. It proceeded qualitatively and then used quantitative methods to analyze the data. We decided to do otherwise.

And then there was Goleman's book: *Emotional Intelligence*. I had read the book prior to our research project. However, as I read what participants said and recorded in journals, something told me to reread his book. I returned to it before the first report writing committee. With some excitement I brought some of his ideas to the group. Perhaps Goleman's theory could shed some scientific light on what we intuitively do as practitioners.

This is how we have used the literature in our research project. Some material delved into the relationship between practitioner and student, but it was either primarily descriptive (*When tutor meets student*) or pedagogical (*The skillful teacher: On technique, trust, and responsiveness in the classroom*). We found no research using our research approach to interpret what goes on in the tutoring relationship from the vantage point of the practitioner. This was disappointing, but supported our belief that our research could make an important contribution to the literature about the relationship between practitioner and student.

Appendix D

Forms Used in the Research

Participants Contract

Student's Informed Consent

Structure – Suggested List of Descriptors
Developed by Participants

Sample Interpretation Chart for Journal Entries

Participant's Contract

Contract of Employment

This is a project of Trent Valley Literacy Association. Sandy Zimmerman will act as the Project Manager on behalf of TVLA, Lesley Hamilton will be the administrator of the project.

I _____ agree to participate in this project “ *What Makes the Learner – Practitioner Relationship Work?*” and agree that I will fulfill my obligations as outlined in this agreement.

I agree to journal as listed below for 18 weeks and will be paid for up to a maximum of 1 ½ hours per week, at the rate of \$25 per hour. I will obtain the informed consent of any student(s) about whom I am journaling. If any student does not wish to be part of the research, I will not journal about that student.

I agree to attend meetings, as listed below, with specific dates to be determined by the research circle participants. I will be paid \$20 per hour for attendance at meetings and mileage. Further, as a participant in the project, I agree to an interview with Sandy.

I understand that as a member of the research circle I can and will regularly communicate with other members of the group about any issues or concerns that I have, and that as a member I will offer support to other members of the group, as appropriate.

I will be provided with the “materials” necessary to complete the journaling - notebooks, pens and training.

The obligations for this project are outlined below:

Journaling – 3 days per week @ ½ hour per day @ \$25 per hour

- ▶ September – 2 weeks
- ▶ October – 5 weeks
- ▶ November – 4 weeks
- ▶ December – 3 weeks
- ▶ January – 4 weeks
- ▶ Completion by the end of January 2004

Meeting dates are to be considered flexible as this is just an estimate. The number of meetings required may be adjusted as necessary– 5 hours per day @ \$20 per hour

- ▶ October 2003
- ▶ December 2003
- ▶ February 2004
- ▶ March 2004
- ▶ May 2004
- ▶ June 2004 (optional)

Travel

- ▶ .30¢ per kilometer

I will submit my invoice at the end of each month to Lesley Hamilton.

Signature _____ Date _____

Student's Informed Consent

What Goes On Here?

Research on Learning by Literacy Practitioners

Trent Valley Literacy Association
September 2003 to June 2004

Information Letter

1. What is this research about?

The purpose of this research is to know more about the relationships between tutors or instructors and learners. What is really happening – for both the practitioner and the student - when the learning is going well? What is really happening when things don't go so well? In order to better understand these experiences, we have agreed to keep journal notes of what we notice about ourselves (as instructors, teachers or tutors) and about our learners, each time we work together. After a few months of keeping journals, we will examine and compare notes and try to learn more from our collective experience. Then we will write some articles to share what we have learned with others, maybe by publishing in literacy newsletters and magazines.

1. Who will be interested in the results of this research?

We think many other literacy workers will be interested in these questions, because we all want to be good practitioners. We think some learners will be interested in these questions as well, because they want to have successful learning experiences. The Ontario Ministry staff have also told us they are interested in what we will discover about how successful learning actually takes place, to help them make good policy for literacy programs. So we hope lots of different people will benefit from this research in the long term.

3. How can I participate?

The research process is very simple. We will invite individual students to participate by giving permission to their tutors or teachers to make notes after classes or tutoring sessions about how things went. The student and instructor might also agree to talk a little at the end of their sessions about how things have gone that day. Then, when students agree, practitioners will make notes in a journal after each session or class, over a period of about three months. Then all the practitioners will get together to compare and analyze their notes, and to write some short reports or articles about what they have learned.

4. Do I have to participate?

No, participation in this research is completely voluntary, for learners as well as tutors and instructors. No teacher or learner is required or will be pressured to participate. There will be no consequences or punishments for deciding not to get involved.

You are free to withdraw at any time if you change your mind.

5. Will real names ever be used? Could I be identified in this research?

The research will be completely confidential and anonymous. That means we will not record real names of learners, even in the journal notes. When we write articles about our findings, fictional names will be used for every learner and may be used for practitioners as well. If needed, we will also change some details in our stories so individuals could not be identified.

6. Can I get a copy of the results?

Yes, the Trent Valley Literacy Association will be happy to send you a summary of the findings from this research when it is complete, which should be in the summer of 2004. If you would like us to do that, please give us your mailing address on the Consent Form below. You will also find our phone number at the bottom of the form.

7. How do I volunteer?

Each person who wants to participate should sign the Consent Form below. It tells the researchers that you understand the purpose of the research and want to participate. We will give you a copy of this form, and it is also our promise to you that all information collected for this research will be strictly confidential. You will also find two phone numbers at the bottom of the form where you can contact us if you have any questions.

INFORMED CONSENT

I volunteer to participate in the research called “What’s Going On Here?” The purpose of the research is to understand the relationships between learners and tutors or instructors. I agree that my tutor or instructor may make notes about our classes or tutoring sessions. But my name will not be recorded in the notes or used in the research reports. My identity will be protected at all times. I may withdraw at any time if I change my mind.

If I want a copy of the results of this research, I have written my address below:

My Name: _____

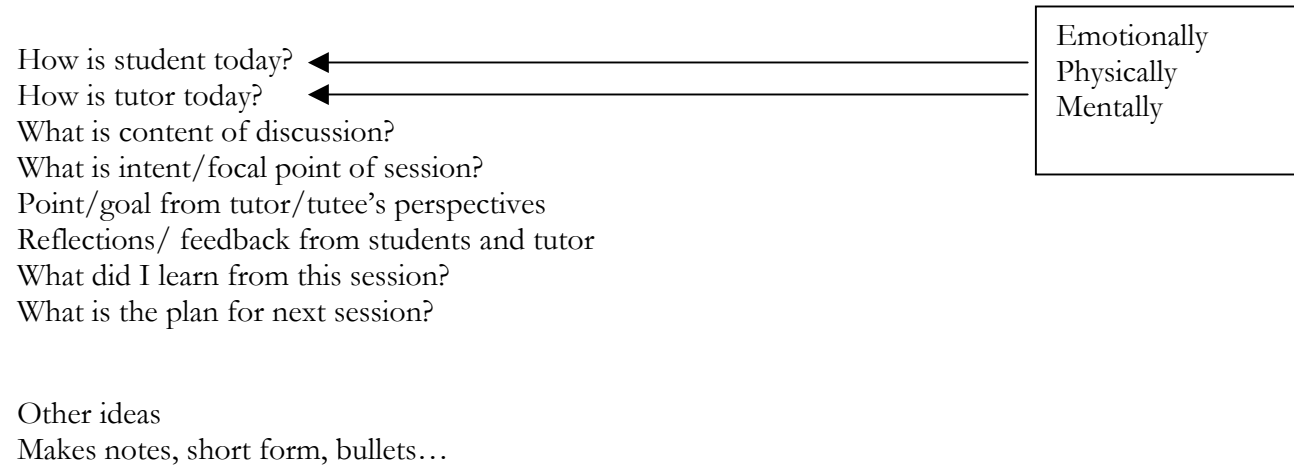
My Address: _____

Please feel free to contact the Research Group at these phone numbers:

Sandy Zimmerman, Project Manager: (705) 656-2745

Lesley Hamilton, Project Administrator: (705) 749-0675

Structure – Suggested List of Descriptors Developed by Participants



SAMPLE INTERPRETATION CHART FOR JOURNAL ENTRIES

Journal Excerpt –Description Only (point form)	By	What Goes On Here? (Make the familiar strange. What am I doing or trying to do? How am I doing it – break it down into its “bits” very self-consciously.)	How is this important for learning to take place?

SAMPLE INTERPRETATION CHART FOR JOURNAL ENTRIES

Journal Excerpt –Description Only (point form)	By	What Goes On Here? (Make the familiar strange. What am I doing or trying to do? How am I doing it – break it down into its “bits” very self-consciously.)	How is this important for learning to take place?
	SZ	<p>I’m setting an atmosphere for work – I’m greeting each student as a real person and trying to get a good look at them to intuit their “mood” and preparation for academics. I’m trying to establish an environment that is conducive to learning – informal but with expectations.</p> <p>How do I do this? My tone of voice is deliberately upbeat when I welcome someone – and I welcome him usually with a grin and eye contact, if possible. If they don’t meet my eye and I know them, I either pursue the greeting, usually with a bit of a jokey tone – or leave them alone and see if they are all right by getting over to them and speaking to them with my back to most everyone else & in a tone & level which is private – If okay, I leave person alone to get set up for work in the group – and ignore washroom, a phone call, shuffling around papers, etc. looking for a pen, pencil, eraser and where they left off the day or days before - may be greeting others, especially those they sit beside – all this usually takes place in quiet tones, unless we haven’t started with anything. I get materials ready before they come for either group talk and/or individual(s) work. I may interrupt working with one student to mention something to the newcomer (e.g. your marked work is over there. How did the interview go? How’s the tooth? etc.) My tone is informal – and somewhat chatty. I move around the group – the students stay in one place. I bend over when talking with someone – and again, tend to try to make eye contact frequently – lighten tone of voice and expression- language tends to be simple and straightforward and my objective is clarity. Check in frequently as to whether understand – via questions</p>	<p>For me, it’s important for the learning situation. I want the environment to feel safe, friendly, a place where each learner is accepted as a unique person with own concerns, but also accepted into a group. Although I think I make my expectations high for each student, I am trying, via the environment to make it informal and helping. I think that learning could probably take place in a different environment, but perhaps this environment is one which suits my style of working with students best. It may not work for some students – and I do see a continuum from those who always want help frequently (or it feels like all the time), to those who want to do it on their own and even are reluctant at first to show me what they are working at.</p> <p>I think it’s important because encased in the environment, if it works, are a whole number of things –</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *informality – learning is not a mystical, exclusive right of others – if it is “exclusive” then the learner might feel outside of the ones who are successful academically *respect for the individual as a person -- accepting differences and being interested in the person as a person with items of life in addition to academics – I think it acknowledges that the learner is human, and we all are- so if another human can do this academic stuff, so can they. *expectations – that the person will succeed – an environment of helpfulness to the extent needed so success is possible. If I have no expectations, then perhaps I will accept anything, or be content if they do not learn – and this wouldn’t work when learning is my goal.

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