

Kansas State University Libraries

New Prairie Press

Adult Education Research Conference

2005 Conference Proceedings (Athens, GA)

History and Hypothesis: Reflecting on the Analysis of a National Research Agenda

Ralf St. Clair

University of Glasgow, Scotland

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc>



Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

Recommended Citation

Clair, Ralf St. (2005). "History and Hypothesis: Reflecting on the Analysis of a National Research Agenda," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2005/papers/4>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

History and Hypothesis: Reflecting on the Analysis of a National Research Agenda

Ralf St.Clair
University of Glasgow, Scotland

In this presentation I discuss a review of the research sponsored by the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) from 1998-2003, conducted during the first nine months of 2004 (St.Clair, 2004). The NLS is by far the biggest funder of research in adult literacy education in Canada, and my role was to assess the work they had recently supported and make suggestions for future directions. The review was essentially pragmatic, but raised a number of issues regarding the politics and process of meta-research. The presentation will examine these issues, as well as the concrete outcomes of the process.

My analysis reflects a model of government sponsored research as a series of concentric rings, as in figure 1 below, representing nested contexts. The central one, the bull's-eye, is the educational practices of educators and the experience of the learners, which can be considered as application of educational knowledge. The next ring out is the research conducted at the local level by entities funded by the NLS, approached as the generation of educational knowledge. The outer layer, for the purposes of this review, is the policy context, which includes the concerns of the NLS itself and also of the wider Canadian political scene. I have chosen to emphasize the policy level's interest in control of educational knowledge, though this should not be read to imply that policy decisions control knowledge seamlessly or completely.

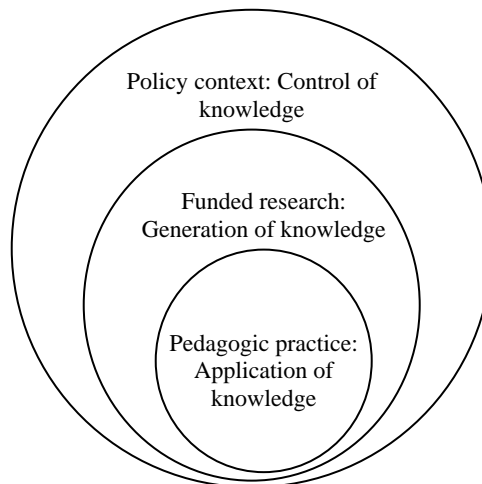


Figure 1: A schematic of knowledge

My central argument concerns the representation of research in the policy process, and particularly in a policy inspired review. There is a significant tension, I suggest, between the idea of a coherent and cumulative research program—the hypothetical ideal—and the reality of disjuncture and contradiction found in a broad body of research due to the pressures of policy and the evolution of interests—the real history. One way to begin thinking this through is to consider where my evaluation fell within the pattern of concentric circles. In a classical model, evaluation would constitute a further, outer layer of the diagram, objective and insulated from political and practical forces, able to present a “final” judgment on the research program (cf Visser 2003). In my experience, however, evaluation fell between the generation and the control

of knowledge. The review of previous research did not sum up the value of all that had gone before so much as mediate between two parallel, but substantially unconnected, endeavors. This again reinforces the importance of historicizing educational research and viewing its hypothetical disinterested pursuit of truth with some caution. I present no firm conclusion and no “solution,” to this tension, arguing that there is a centrifugal relationship between the desire for simplification that marks policy and the recognition of complexity marking responsible research.

The Application of Knowledge

Interestingly, there was little that I was able to say about the concrete application of knowledge from the research I reviewed. There was a huge amount of diversity in the practices that constituted the focus of the funded research, ranging from senior’s projects in Newfoundland to work with young offenders in Alberta, but there was little evidence that the research projects had any effect on the practices. The format of the projects was usually to identify an issue about which the funded organization wished to know more, to develop a proposal, to conduct a process with more or less resemblance to the proposal, and then to submit a one page final report to the NLS. One aspect of application is dissemination—making sure that people know what your research is trying to do and what the outcomes are—but very few of the research projects defined dissemination mechanisms in the proposal or the final report.

In reviewing the NLS files I became increasingly aware of the value of some of the findings contained within them. There were studies that could, if developed appropriately, have huge impact on adult literacy practices, but the results were buried in files in Ottawa. This is not to suggest that there was a deliberate policy to keep the findings away from practitioners, but there was not a clear mechanism for doing so. Some of the research had been published in various forms, but this was at the initiative of the individual project rather than a systematic effort.

The frailty of the links between application and generation of knowledge are quite interesting, and raise questions about what the research is for. Surely if the aim was to improve and enrich practices this would have been reflected in a sophisticated and effective dissemination mechanism? One of my strongest recommendations was that dissemination—and the monitoring of dissemination—should be given attention. Currently there is a “hollow” series of rings, where the centre ring of application does not feature strongly in the research process.

The Generation of Knowledge

In this section I describe the NLS research program using criteria derived from the official discourse of what the program was meant to achieve. These include a number of unsurprising and rather obvious concerns. The review covered 434 research projects.

In Canada, an officially bilingual country, the language of research is an important concern. The projects are divided over the last five years in a constant ratio of 75% English to 25% French, almost exactly the population breakdown of Anglophones and Francophones. However, the research pursued by the language groups is significantly different, with the English language research resembling American models and the French language research more European and communitarian in focus.

The length of the grants has varied considerably over the five year period. The grants started to cover longer periods, extending from a mean of 9 months to 13 months, and then went back to 9 months again. The current project year at the time of the review included several projects with multi-year funding, suggesting an increase in the mean length again. Interestingly,

there has been considerably less variation in funding patterns. Over the period reviewed the mean grant increased from \$45,000 to \$60,000 with a drop in projects receiving under \$20,000 or over \$100,000. The decrease in the latter category is largely because of a policy directive moving them onto a different funding mechanism, but nonetheless there is less diversity in the scale of projects than several years ago.

The topics and outcomes of the funded projects were hard to gather into meaningful categories. Research projects are allocated target group codes when they are approved for funding, such as “learners” or “rural,” but these codes are driven by bureaucratic accountability needs rather than a desire to understand the effect of the research program as a whole. In addition only one code can be given to each project, so that a project looking at issues of rural learners is forced into one code and difficult to track in other ways. In order to understand the focus of NLS research over the last five years in more depth I developed nine categories based on the outcomes of the projects. The categories were program prototypes, organizational development, materials development, evaluation, infrastructure development, professional development, basic research, needs assessment, and teaching strategies. These nine categories were developed by the pragmatic approach of asking “what did the project try to do?”

Six categories have lost ground or stayed constant (as a percentage of all programs):

- Program prototypes have shrunk from 22 to 16 percent.
- Organizational development projects have fallen off from 7 to 3 per cent.
- Material development includes writing resource manuals or workbooks, creating videos, and developing other materials. While this category was significant in 1998 it barely still exists, but the NLS has a separate funding stream for materials.
- Program evaluations have fallen from 11 to 5 per cent.
- Infrastructure development, including funding for meetings or other initiatives, from 13 to 10 per cent.
- Professional development has remained around the same level over the last five years.

Three areas have shown a significant trend to growth:

- Basic research, which includes any projects which aim to increase the knowledge base in adult literacy education by examining fundamental questions, has grown a little.
- Needs assessments have increased dramatically over five years, from 15 to 29 percent. In 2001, over a third of all projects were needs assessments.
- Studies of teaching strategy have also expanded a great deal—from 1 to 11 per cent of projects funded.

The three areas which have grown (needs assessment, teaching, and basic research) constituted 32 per cent of projects in 1998. By 2003, they constituted 61 per cent—almost two thirds of all projects. By any account, this represents a significant reorientation of NLS research towards these areas. While teaching strategy and basic research can be presented as central components of any research endeavor, the argument is not so clear for needs assessments. By their nature, needs assessments are designed to have localized impact, do not provide direct services, and may not add a great deal to research capacity. There is reason to be cautious about

the growth of needs assessments that are not part of a larger project intended either to provide findings for broader projects or to provide service.

So far the questions addressed were conventional, but there was still a need to find a way to provide an overarching summation of the program. This required careful consideration of the context of the program, and its placement within the control of knowledge.

The Control of Knowledge

Looking beyond the research program, there were a number of broad factors affecting literacy research in the late 1990s and early 2000s. One of the most influential was the International Adult Literacy Survey, especially in Canada where one of the leaders of the IALS development team worked in Statistics Canada. This study created a conceptual framework and associated multi-lingual instrument for measuring literacy skills in different countries across the world (cf. Tuijnman, 2000). While IALS has been roundly criticized for reductionism (Blum et al., 2001) it has also changed the way decision makers think about literacy by providing an apparently objective way to assess the impact of literacy education on the population. The IALS model of literacy is skills-based and functional, but seductively straightforward.

Two other broad factors are the related emphases on economic outcomes of education and increased requirements for accountability in governmental spending. The trend towards clear demonstration of effectiveness in government services over the last thirty years has boiled down to a concern about “value for money.” While a great deal could be said about the issues of portraying citizens as consumers of the state, the critical effect in this case has been the use of instruments of fiscal control as a way to understand how well education is serving the community (Marginson, 1997). “Cost-benefit analysis” and “return on investment” have come to appear as almost sensible ways to think about education.

There are also three internal factors I particularly wish to highlight. The first is a document (NLS, 1998) created from a number of participant consultations designed to provide guidance regarding the development of research over the next five years. The review I conducted was intended to look back to this framework and assess how well the design had been followed. The framework was, however, quite confusing, and offered little real guidance beyond suggestions that methods should be tightened up and dissemination emphasized. Nonetheless my work was part of a continuing effort to shape and evaluate the research program.

Second, when established the NLS had been seen as a vehicle to use research as a tool for community development. The intention was not so much to generate rigorous new knowledge, but to get funds to local programs to allow them to explore alternative practices and build their strengths. This was an important philosophical orientation, and directly counter to the economically driven agenda mentioned above. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that the NLS is often seen as an “outsider secretariat” within Human Resource Development Canada (the home department at the time of review). HRDC has a strong vocational focus, and the NLS had long been seen as the “lefty” segment of the department.

Making a Review

It was a considerable challenge to put together a responsible review of a research program in the light of these various factors and tensions. In addition to the above, there was also my own position to take into account. As a researcher, I expect research to have certain characteristics that I am fairly confident are expected by other researchers—such as a literature review, a conclusion, public findings, and so on. I spent quite a lot of time reflecting on what the

review was expected to achieve, and realized that the task was not a pure evaluation, but a mediation of the interests involved with the research program. It was not an analytical project as much as a creative one. This reflects the current state of evaluation theory, which has evolved beyond mechanistic approaches to theoretically informed pragmatism (Visser, 2003).

I decided to develop a rubric for the research projects that would reflect a variety of interests rather than place them on a single continuum. I identified six dimensions for the rubric:

1. Systematic. Irrespective of the details of the method, did the research project demonstrate a clearly organized approach to gathering and analyzing information?
2. Cumulative. Does the project should recognize previous work that has been done on the topic and, ideally, attempt to synthesize it as a starting point for the current project?
3. Immediate impact. To what extent has the project had an impact upon the practices of the agency or organization conducting it?
4. General impact. To what extent has the project made a difference to practices beyond the context in which it is conducted without having broad abstract or theoretical implications?
5. Research preparation. Has the project involved graduate students or community members who are able to continue adult literacy research?
6. Contribution. To what degree has the project contributed to the overall body of knowledge on the topic?

The dimensions of this review fall either into “generally recognized research practice” (numbers 1, 2 and 6) or “developing a research community” (numbers 3,4 and 5). My aim was to produce a series of outcomes showing that NLS sponsored research was providing valuable information for the field, and to do it in a way that would prove convincing even to those operating within strictly economic models of accountability. I applied the rubric to two specific areas of work, research with Aboriginal Peoples (AP) and the Literacy Experts (LE) category, about 20% of all funded projects. I did not have the time or other resources to examine all 434. The results proved to be interesting.

LE were better at systematic research, as might be expected when compared to new community based researchers such as AP, but otherwise there was very little difference. Overall, there was little evidence that the research program in these two areas had either promoted good research practice or contributed substantially to the development of a research community. My review led finally to ten recommendations that would strengthen the program in these areas, framed in a positive way and mediating between interests as I had hoped they would. But I continued to wonder about the program, which was strongly supported by the literacy community, and what its core values were.

As I reflected I came to realize that the problem was not the program itself, but evaluation of the program. The evaluation was stuck fast in the tension between the forces of hypothesis (the idealized model of educational research) and those of history (the realpolitik of policy and money). The research program as a whole was supporting action and knowledge generation at a local level, but this did not abstract to outcomes easily demonstrated on the global program level.

Implications

There are three tentative implications I would offer regarding review of broad research programs similar to the NLS. First, review is simultaneously a creative, political, and pragmatic task. Second, there does seem to be some evidence that research can contribute to building an educational community, even if more on the level of practice than through the generation of knowledge. Third, there can be significant tension between the development of a coherent and rigorous research program and the ability to respond to changing conditions at the local and policy levels. Each of these implications reflects the contradictions between the simplicity necessary for policy action and the recognition of complexity required for responsible research. This review, and I believe many others, by being positioned between generation and control of knowledge, is required to work within those contradictions. There can be no final conclusion about the value of research in this circumstance, but only partial presentations of specific aspects of the program. The open question is how we can know the value of research programs if we cannot even be sure about where we expect the impact to manifest.

References

- Blum, A., Goldstein, H., & Guerin-Pace, F. (2001). International adult literacy survey: An analysis of international comparisons of adult literacy. *Assessment in Education*, 8, 225-246.
- Marginson, S. (1997). *Markets in education*. St. Leonards, NSW, Australia: Allen & Unwin.
- NLS (1998). *Enhancing Literacy Research in Canada: A Framework for the Research Support Activities of the National Literacy Secretariat*, Human Resources Development Canada. Ottawa: Author.
- St.Clair, R. (2004). *Review of Research supported by the National Literacy Secretariat 1998-2003*. Ottawa, ON: HRSD.
- Tuijnman, A. (2000). *International adult literacy survey: Benchmarking adult literacy in America, An international comparative study*. Washington, DC: US Department of Education, available at www.ed.gov/offices/ovae/publicat.html.
- Visser, R. M. (2003). *Trends in programme evaluation literature: The emergence of pragmatism*. College Station, TX: Texas Center for the Advancement of Literacy and Learning.