



From Theory to Practice with Bridges

LEARNING TO LEARN:

What happens when research recommendations hit the ground?

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This paper is dedicated to Robert M., one of the pilot students, who died unexpectedly as the paper was being written. Robert's courage inspired us all.

ABSTRACT

This paper outlines preliminary observations from an action learning project at a small literacy council. The initial impetus for this process came from the *Bridges to Practice* guidelines, supported by the National Institute for Literacy, which were written to stimulate systemic change on behalf of learning disabled adult literacy students. In a volunteer context, national policy initiatives cannot be implemented by fiat, but must be negotiated with tutors and with students. Literacy Council facilitators trained tutors and students together in a participatory pilot program designed to experiment with new research-based approaches. A number of tutor-student pairs reported that their relationship was profoundly changed as a result of participating in the project. However, most participants did not take advantage of specialized assessments or dramatically change their actual instructional approaches. The nature of volunteer literacy militates against some of these approaches because of time constraints and because of the paucity of tutor-friendly materials available to support them. In the absence of such materials, local councils run the risk of diluting or distorting the approaches in their attempt to encourage tutors to implement these approaches. Lasting systemic change requires time, energy and resources at all levels, with particular attention paid to the needs of those who are providing services.

INTRODUCTION

Action research, participatory inquiry, multiple perspectives, rapid change, learning organizations—the work this paper represents can be situated somewhere among this welter of turn of the century concepts and buzzwords. Action research has a long and venerable history. In essence it is the notion that engaging stakeholders in a process of reflective inquiry as they work on problems which are meaningful to them, will lead to deeper mutual understanding, more effective activity, and longer-lasting improvements (Stringer, 1999). There is a great deal of evidence to show that implementing substantive and sustainable change at a community level requires a process of collective learning and re-framing old constructs (Chambers, 1992; Schein, 1998). Organizations that seek to survive in an era of rapid change are well advised, therefore, to become proficient at learning (Argyris, 1993).

This paper presents the first steps taken by a small volunteer literacy council to initiate a process of systemic change to improve outcomes for learning disabled (LD) students and to use action research as a way of facilitating, monitoring and evaluating this change process.

DOMAINS OF INQUIRY

During this phase, we have explored three domains of inquiry:

1. Can we engage our volunteer tutors and students in a process of participatory inquiry? If so, what will result?
2. Given the resource and capacity constraints of a small literacy council, what actions can we take which will positively benefit students with learning disabilities or difficulties?
3. What actually happens when a small literacy council grapples with national research recommendations? What compromises are made? What upward recommendations can we make to national policy agencies?

The volunteer literacy movement is founded on the premise that non-professional volunteers can help adults to learn basic literacy skills and that this can be accomplished in the interstices of the busy lives of volunteer tutors and students alike. The Cape Fear Literacy Council (CFLC), with a staff of four, is a small Laubach-affiliated volunteer literacy council annually serving approximately 350 literacy students. Each year its volunteer training team trains approximately 150 new volunteer tutors and provides additional in-service training to existing tutors.

BRIDGES TO PRACTICE

In 1998-9 The National Institute for Literacy, in conjunction with the National Adult Literacy and Learning Disabilities Center, published *Bridges to Practice: A Research-based Guide for Literacy Practitioners Serving Adults with Learning Disabilities*. This five-volume set of guidebooks (referred to in this text as Bridges) was written to stimulate a process of systemic change to improve outcomes for learning disabled adult literacy students. In addition, the Learning Disabilities Training and Dissemination (LDTD) project was developed to build the capacity of literacy providers to implement the Bridges guidelines. North Carolina was chosen as one of the pilot states through the Laubach Literacy Action-Literacy Volunteers of America hub, and CFLC was chosen as one of six pilot councils in North Carolina to participate in the project.

Estimates for the number of adult education students who are likely to be learning disabled range from 50-80% (Vogel, 1998). As staff and training volunteers at a small literacy council, we were acutely aware that we had shied away from exploring learning disabilities in any depth and that we provided relatively little in the way of special services for clients likely to be learning disabled. We were, therefore, eager to investigate the Bridges recommendations. Our involvement was made easier because

one member of the state LDTD training team was also our lead trainer.

For the Cape Fear Literacy Council, the overall project has many aspects and will take several years to implement. We have begun to critically examine our operational assumptions and practices, develop and monitor indicators of systemic change, gather and learn from new sources of information, evaluate screening instruments and instructional materials, provide training to our board, staff, trainer, tutors and students, disseminate information and resource materials for tutors and students, and so on.

This paper focuses on one aspect of the project—the initial introduction and adaptation of new instructional approaches with tutors and students.

THE PILOT PROJECT

We were concerned that blindly attempting to implement the new research findings and new instructional approaches by simply adding on a Bridges-inspired module to our existing tutor-training workshop would prove fruitless. Training is one thing, actually doing what we have been trained to do is something entirely different and much more rare. Implementing the instructional approaches recommended in the Bridges guidelines would clearly demand a great deal of work, and some risks, for our tutors and students. Therefore, we felt the change process needed to be guided by their experiences and insights and that ultimately it would need to be integrated with other change processes.

Our first challenge was to create space for dialogue. Our basic approach to inviting participation was straightforward. After an initial open meeting of tutors and students to discuss learning issues in general, we invited interested tutors and students and all of the volunteer training team to join us in a pilot group. The pilot group's explicit brief was to experiment with new approaches and tools, to report on their experience and

to make recommendations to CFLC at the end of the pilot period.

Fourteen tutor-student pairs participated. Seven students participated actively in the training and feedback sessions. The seven remaining students were “shadow” participants—that is they did not attend the sessions and their feedback was expressed primarily via their tutors. Participant demographics roughly matched those for the council as a whole, in order to test our assumption that teaching practices which are effective for LD students would also work well with all our students (Fowler & Scarborough, 1993).

All but the three ESL students were given the Payne Learning Needs Screening. The screening results for the remaining 11 students showed them all in need of further evaluation for LD. The pilot group was presented with a series of assessment tasks modified from the very useful manual published by the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, *Destination Literacy: Identifying and Teaching Adults with Learning Disabilities*. These assessments, which are conducted in collaboration with a student, are designed to give participants insight into particular areas of difficulty in decoding (including phonemic awareness), comprehension, writing, spelling and math. In addition, a variety of specific instructional interventions are also provided.

Tutors and students together received a day of training on screening and instruction. Follow up meetings took place over the subsequent four months. Three of the follow-up sessions included a new brief training component (on screening, assessment and direct instruction, respectively) as well as allowing time for general discussion about how things were going. The LDTD trainer and her student served as an on going “case study” for the group and together they led the training sessions, with additional input from a special education consultant and facilitation by the program coordinator. The final

meeting focused on eliciting feedback and recommendations.

We chose the SMARTER methodology as the focal point for our pilot because it is a general learning framework. As such, we believed it would be applicable to all learners (including tutors and trainers as learners). The framework, outlined in Bridges, volumes 3 and 4, was developed by Keith Lenz at the University of Kansas and makes explicit the need for adequate reflection and analysis as part of the learning cycle. Not only did this tie in with other metacognitive approaches, but it also mirrored our own desire to facilitate a process of wider reflection on behalf of the council. In addition, the framework is clear and simple to understand, if not to implement.

The principles which guided the facilitators included

- 1) creating a climate where genuine communication could take place,
- 2) active listening,
- 3) promising to take what was said seriously – that is to use what was said to guide future decision-making,
- 4) to model the SMARTER framework throughout the training making it explicit that the pilot process is an example of a learning cycle of action-reflection.

Facilitator-led discussion was the primary vehicle for communication, but we also used a number of ranking and mapping tools to gather information more quickly and make it visible and accessible to participants (Pretty, Guijt, Thompson & Scoones, 1996). In addition, participants kept learning journals and wrote short responses to questions during some sessions.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

The pilot was exciting, touching, humbling and disappointing. Tutors and students alike highly valued the opportunity to talk together about learning and their insights and

experiences have provided staff and trainers with a fresh perspective on tutor-student relationships and concerns. This opportunity appeared to have a transformative effect for many of the pilot pairs.

On the other hand, from the perspective of effective training in the Bridges-recommended approaches, we were unsuccessful. Although tutors and students reported that they enjoyed the training and found it stimulating, by the final session, only one pair reported using the SMARTER methodology consistently. Most pairs had used or adapted aspects of the framework. Only half of the participants reported even trying direct instruction methods, again reporting a haphazard approach to it. Despite the fact that screening indicated that nearly all the students should undertake further assessment for LD, no students chose to undergo more extensive screening with the LD specialist. Only three pairs reported using the informal assessments to help them identify specific areas of weakness and gain insight into problem areas.

At the last pilot meeting tutors and students provided the literacy council with a list of simple, practical recommendations: to provide better resources that are easier to use, to continue to stimulate on-going discussion through more student and tutor meetings and in-services and to provide more assistance with assessment tasks. Overall they expressed relative contentment with the status quo at the literacy council, and did not particularly share our grand vision for systemic change.

LEARNING POINTS

One criticism leveled at action research projects is that nothing is proven and often nothing particularly startling is revealed. It is axiomatic that the greatest value and the greatest learning takes place within and among participants. Many, if not all, of our “findings” have already been reported in the adult education literature. It is our hope that

this brief summary of some of our key learning points captures a little of the flavor of tutors and students actually grappling with instructional decision making.

Opening Space for Dialogue

Opening up space for participatory inquiry changes the dynamics of the tutor-student relationship, which is at the heart of volunteer literacy. It is generally a relationship between people whose life experiences and relative social power are very different, and these differences may be intensified by additional cleavages along gender, ethnicity, age and class lines. Given all this, and the inherently unequal relationship implied by “tutor” and “student”, it is unsurprising that much of the discussion in our pilot revolved around relationship issues. As people became comfortable with one another, they revealed more about their feelings, which were often intense, and even painful.

Several pairs expressed their sense that their relationships had been stuck and that it had been difficult for students to make suggestions or to take the lead. For them, meeting together in a larger group helped to unfreeze the relationship and fostered a new sense of joint responsibility for learning, which they described with pleasure. As tutors and students saw each other more fully as ordinary, fallible, people with insecurities and fears, the power in several tutor-student relationships shifted. As one tutor put it, “It may have been disillusioning, but now we are just two adults trying to solve a problem together.” Students expressed their greater sense of freedom in practical ways, for example by exploring the resource room for the first time, by suggesting new materials for tutors to use, or by rejecting some of their tutor’s suggestions. As one student said, “I don’t have to pretend any more.”

Reflection and Analysis

A major theme of the pilot was reflection and analysis. “You’re training us to use our

minds. It’s a whole new thing,” said one student.

The SMARTER cycle of instructional planning begins by asking questions, mapping and analyzing and it ends with evaluation. Tutors and students were given training in reflection and analysis focusing primarily on this model but also emphasizing the use of reflective journals and discussion for analysis.

Fostering the ability of LD students to think about how they learn—metacognitive approaches—has been widely viewed as a critical component of effective instruction. At the same time, the ability of tutors to observe, analyze and revise their instruction is at the heart of knowing how to work with specific learning difficulties. However, it is also very difficult. While students expressed some delight in thinking more deeply and using their minds, tutors expressed a great deal of hesitation, resistance and skepticism about analysis tasks.

For example, despite a fair amount of support and despite general enthusiasm on the part of most of the students, many tutors resisted using mapping and lesson organizers. Their resistance was expressed most often as “we don’t have time for that.” Students on the other hand did not express any particular reservations and some were very positive about the mapping. “The map is like a mirror. With a mirror you can see your arms, your face. With the map, I can see my mind.”

On the other hand, the guided learning journals proved wildly popular, particularly with tutors, and were used as a reflective tool at the end of lessons. “The journal helps me think and set goals.” “I was skeptical, but the journal has been a real positive step for us.”

Core Materials

Volunteer tutors in our council rely on a variety of core materials to provide instruction to reading students. Tutors are

trained to supplement these texts with a variety of real-life materials and additional exercises (for example, language experience writing and the newspaper) depending on student interests and needs. Skill books give both tutors and students a feeling of security and accomplishment. A 1998 evaluation of actual tutoring practices at CFLC revealed that our tutors in general valued using the skill books over twice as highly as using other materials or techniques, which were seen as supplementary. However, pilot tutors and students reported dissatisfaction as they glided through workbooks even when students had not mastered the material. It was all too tempting for both tutors and students to use the completion of a given lesson as a sign of progress. "Our traditional method of marching through the core materials may be endangered," one tutor said.

During the first two months of the pilot, tutors and students were energized. They had begun to notice gaps in student's skills and to experiment with new approaches. Tutors and students were given additional (brief) training in direct instruction methods, which emphasizes the need for supported practice and review. Students expressed relief at having their learning needs better understood. As one student put it, "I have to get the foundation. I'm a builder. It's no good putting a roof on if the foundation isn't strong." These kinds of observations prompted tutors and student to return to basic foundational skills, to spend more time in review and to seek more appropriate forms of independent practice.

However, by the end of the pilot, nearly all of the tutors and students said that, for the most part, they were continuing to work in their skill books in much the same way as they had been four months earlier. Why? The two most frequent explanations they gave were lack of time and lack of appropriate additional materials to use. To this the facilitators would add that generally even the most dedicated volunteer tutors

have a limited interest in becoming literacy "experts" and they resist approaches that require a major investment of time and energy to learn.

Effect of Disruptions on Change Processes

It is a truism that adult literacy students and volunteer tutors have busy lives. During the course of this pilot tutoring schedules were disrupted by two hurricanes and by the holiday season. In the same four month period, the majority of students experienced some sort of major life disruption: two were laid off work, two found new jobs in other towns, one became ill, one had to care for a new grandchild, one was involved in a drive by shooting, and so on.

Given these disruptions, the initial impetus to try out something new in a tutoring session often gave way to "catching up" when tutors and students did find time to meet. The new instructional approaches demand a greater degree of initial discussion, assessment and planning than most pairs were able to generate on their own. Although we had attempted to provide a context where tutors and students could jointly change norms, in the end old habits and ways of thinking prevailed. In the language of Schein "for change to remain stable, it must be 'refrozen'" (Schein, 1998) and in order for refreezing to take place, learners must find ways to invent their own solutions.

Some pilot tutors and students have begun to do this, adapting the new approaches to their own needs. In the process, they experienced a resurgence of energy and interest in learning coupled with a sense of adventure. However, based on their reports, we felt they may have diluted or distorted research-based methods in their personal adaptation. While this distortion may, in some cases, prove more effective than the research recommendations, it is likely to be less effective in the long run.

Other pairs simply gave up on the new approaches and reverted to timeworn techniques, which have indeed proved reasonably successful in the past. The very nature of volunteer literacy militates against some of the new approaches which demand a degree of time, expertise and resources not currently available in a volunteer context. Designing appropriately individualized metacognitive, collaborative, multi-sensory direct instruction is not a piece of cake. Indeed, it is tremendously challenging.

Challenges for Volunteer Literacy Councils

Action research is, by its nature, not a one-shot deal. This pilot represents only the first stage in a particular spiral of learning and changing for our council. During the course of the pilot, John Corcoran, author of *The Teacher Who Couldn't Read*, and a well-known advocate on behalf of learning disabled students visited us. Corcoran learned to read with a volunteer literacy tutor, but after experiencing some initial success, he sought more expert help at a Lindamood clinic. In talking to CFLC staff he emphasized that for people like him “a heart of gold is not enough.” Councils must also be able to provide better instruction based on scientific research to their students who need it

Given that tutors are generally not professional educators and that tutoring is a small part of their lives it appears that if we want to be able to do this, we must radically re-think our delivery systems. Alternatively, we can accept our limitations and seek instead to help learning-disabled students access other specialized sources of help, while continuing to support them to the best of our abilities. Unfortunately, these alternatives are currently abstract. Sources of expert professional advice for LD adults are non-existent in many places. Elsewhere they are either tremendously expensive or

time-consuming, or available only to a very few students.

We believe, therefore, that there will continue to be a great need for non-professional volunteers to tutor learning disabled students for the foreseeable future. Therefore, we also believe that more needs to be done to support these volunteers. Specifically, there is an urgent need for materials designed with the needs of volunteer tutors and their adult students in mind. There is an urgent need, also, for research specifically undertaken within the context of volunteer literacy to illuminate alternative possibilities for all of us to better serve adults with learning disabilities.

Challenges for Researchers and Policy Makers

Lasting systemic change—at least in a system as complex as adult literacy provision-- requires time, energy and resources at all levels. At this stage it is unclear to us exactly which of the national policy recommendations are feasible to implement, given the relative lack of additional resources, both financial and instructional.

In addition, adult literacy educators are being buffeted by a variety of different forces for change. For example, the new National Reporting System associated with the Workforce Investment Act has created another set of demands on our resources. In a volunteer context, national policy initiatives cannot be implemented by fiat, but must be negotiated with tutors and with students. It is our hope that the enormous value of volunteer efforts in providing literacy services will not be diminished by top-down expectations but will be enhanced by backing fresh and creative ways to support volunteers' efforts. Particular attention must be paid to the context and needs of those who are actually providing instruction. General principles and evaluative guidelines are not sufficient.

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