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Recommended Citation

Bingman, Mary Beth and Smith, Christine (2001). "Research to Practice, Research in Practice: Disseminating Results or Supporting Change?," *Adult Education Research Conference*.
<https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2001/papers/11>

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Research to Practice, Research in Practice: Disseminating Results or Supporting Change?

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Abstract: This roundtable will provide an opportunity to discuss what the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy has been doing to connect research and practice and to explore how to facilitate collaborative associations between practitioners and researchers.

Introduction

For both researchers and practitioners, the connections between research and practice are often not clear. Researchers wonder if their findings have any impact on the field; practitioners wonder why no one is answering their questions. In the field of adult learning and literacy, there are many barriers to a smooth process of research informing practice. Research cannot be disseminated through standard university-based teacher-training programs because most adult literacy practitioners do not have formal preservice education specifically related to teaching ABE, ESOL, or ASE. Instead, teacher preparation (preservice and inservice) in ABE is offered through state ABE staff development systems, many of which do not have a link to or a method for promoting research results. Furthermore, many research studies do not produce products that engage practitioners in thinking about how research results apply to practice. Rather, research tends to produce briefs, reports, and articles; but practitioners say they need strategies, techniques, and ideas arising from such research that is applicable to their classrooms or programs.

However, both researchers and practitioners in adult education are developing ways to build connections that go beyond what Wrigley and Guth (1992) has called the *applied science* model of staff development. The National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL), a collaborative research center funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement (p. 203), has explored these connections in several ways. This roundtable provides an opportunity to share some of what we have been doing and to explore with others how to build connections between practitioners and researchers.

Building Connections

The Practitioner Dissemination and Research Network (PDRN) was formed by NCSALL both to more effectively disseminate research findings and to inform research with the perspectives of practitioners. The PDRN is made up of *practitioner leaders*, adult education teachers and

administrators, from 13 states. They have been involved in a variety of activities, including dissemination of information about NCSALL and NCSALL research, helping NCSALL researchers in identifying sites or collecting data, conducting focus groups on the research agenda, facilitating study circles in which teachers have discussed the usefulness of research findings for their work, and participating in practitioner research. The practitioner leaders are now participating in the development of a report that will document and evaluate the PDRN. NCSALL publishes a monthly newsletter, *Focus on Basics* (FOB), that is written for, and often by, practitioners. NCSALL researchers are helped by *FOB* editors to write jargon-free articles discussing their research in progress as well as their results. Practitioners may write on their own research or on learning from classroom practice. Each issue is theme based and developed and reviewed by an editorial board that includes practitioners and others with an interest in that topic. An electronic discussion list serves as a forum for discussion of *FOB* articles. The first issue of *FOB* (1997) was on "research itself" (Garner, 1997) and examined types of research, how to read it, how to identify pitfalls, how to use it, and how practitioners and researchers can join together.

In addition to the PDRN and *FOB*, some NCSALL researchers have facilitated connections to practice in their research through collaboration with practitioners following the same research theme. Others have spoken at practitioner conferences at state and national levels. From our work, we have learned that in order for practitioners to use the results of research to improve practice, they need to participate in activities that will engage them in thinking about how such results apply to their own practice. These activities include:

- Becoming involved in study circles in which teachers read research reports and develop classroom strategies using the information the reports contain,
- conducting practitioner research and using the results of national research to investigate issues in their own classrooms, and
- attending multisession policy briefings or strategy sessions where there is time and a mechanism for brainstorming how research information is applicable in their own programs.

We have also found that "translations" of research in newsletter articles or in such products as study-circle guides are welcomed by practitioners who are hungry for knowledge that addresses the issues they encounter daily in their classes, but whose time is severely limited.

The NCSALL efforts to connect practice and research have also raised questions that we hope to continue to explore with practitioners and researchers:

1. What are the responsibilities of researchers to practitioners?
2. Who determines the research agenda?
3. What methods effectively engage practitioners with research and in research?
4. What kinds of systems in adult education are needed to facilitate the research-practice connections?

References

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