

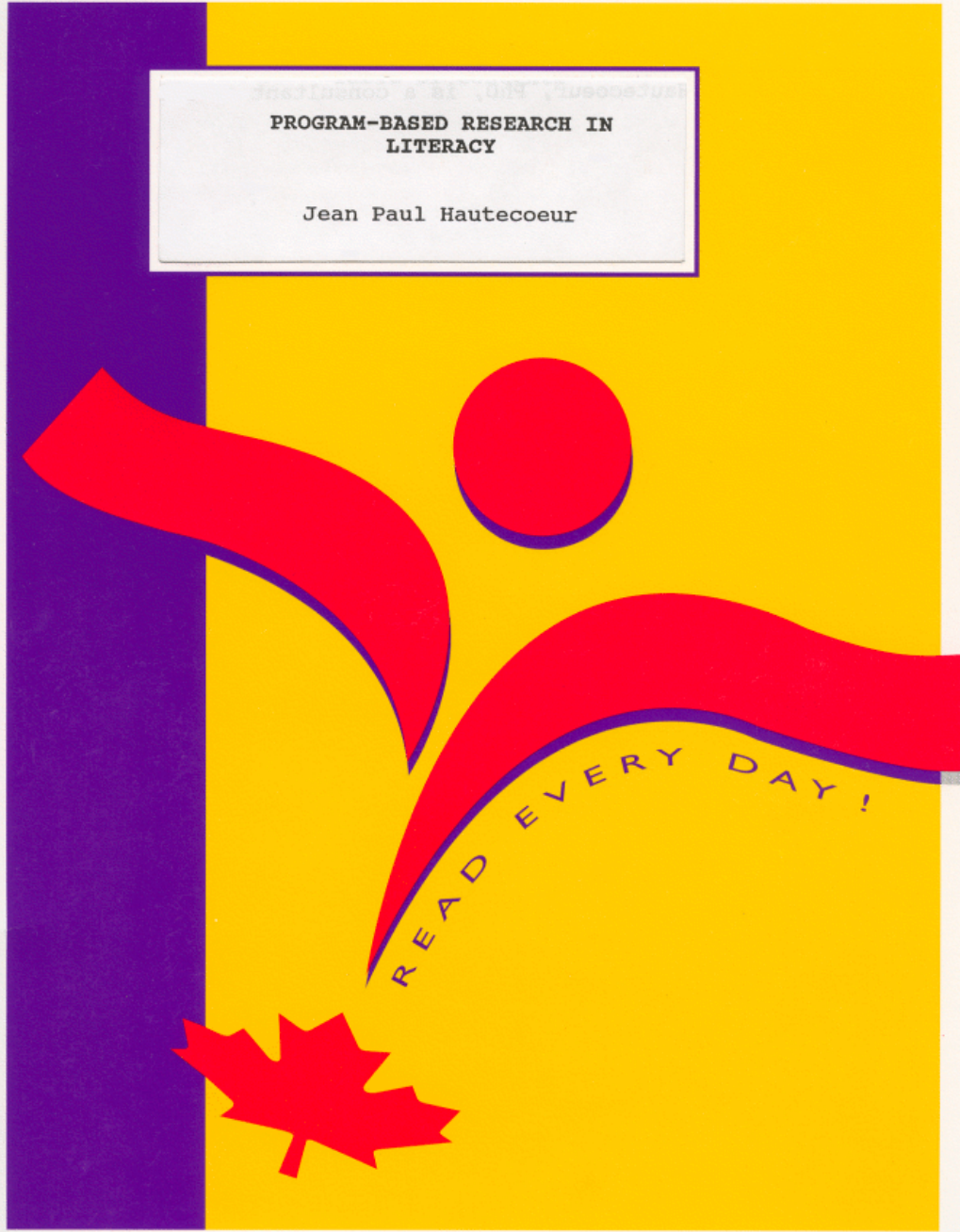


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**PROGRAM-BASED RESEARCH IN  
LITERACY**

Jean Paul Hautecoeur



*National  
Literacy  
Secretariat*



*Le Secrétariat  
national à  
l'alphabétisation*

Canada

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## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Program-based Research</b>	<b>3</b>
Some common ideas	
The relationship with action	
<b>The Underdevelopment of Research Tied to Action</b>	<b>7</b>
In voluntary organizations	
In educational institutions	
In the ways it is represented	
In attitudes	
In the status of literacy	
<b>Favourable Conditions for Program-based Research</b>	<b>13</b>
Self-sufficiency	
The resources	
The personnel	
Outside collaborations	
Written reports	
The methodology and techniques	
<b>Some Examples of Program-based Research</b>	<b>17</b>
An evaluation	
An educational experiment	
A dialogue with participants	
A production of awareness-raising documents	
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Bibliographical Notes</b>	<b>27</b>

## **INTRODUCTION**

The following text is presented primarily as some thoughts on research in the everyday life of literacy programs and as an account of the author's experience. It aims to be involved in the socio-cultural movement of literacy, rather than independent and neutral. It views the act of research as an integral, inseparable part of action in literacy which we tend too much to reduce to educational performance. It opts for a holistic practice of literacy that avoids too great a separation of the activities, the persons and the functions involved in the learning of reading and writing. As well, it considers this learning as an act of research, a quest for meaning in a living language rather than as technical functional training or scholastic training -- or even indeed adult education training.

The first part explains the concept of program-based research. The second part reports on the relative lack of research in this area and gives a brief analysis of the circumstances that explain this state of underdevelopment. The third part investigates the conditions favourable to the development of program-based research in the everyday life of literacy programs. Then, four examples of program-based research in Canada are presented. The conclusion points out the main limits of program-based research, but also reiterates the importance of its linkage with literacy programs.

## **PROGRAM-BASED RESEARCH**

### Some common ideas

What exactly is program-based research, which we also call participant research, involved (as opposed to applied) research, or simply everyday research?

We often have preconceived ideas about research which we consider as a learned activity and outside of everyday life, and about literacy programs as entailing a teaching/learning practice. Another deep-rooted prejudice lies in radically distinguishing "illiterates" from other persons. Such prejudicial views would see illiterate persons as incompetent, disabled or as having an intellectual impairment - interesting as objects of research. To others, such as professionals, would fall the more comfortable role of agents in the research or in the educational performance. James Draper has done some very important writing about these "myths" that prevent a vital relationship between research and action:

"One such myth is that evaluation and research are best left to specialized researchers. On the contrary, practitioners are quite capable of undertaking a program of research and evaluation. Other mythologies about research are that it requires highly technical skills; that the information collected needs to be quantified, computerized and statistically manipulated; and that research is a costly frill only to be undertaken if an agency has the time and the money. Research is also considered to be depersonalizing, threatening and shrouded in academic jargon -- a time-consuming distraction from the real task of educating. However, much research is just the opposite. It is highly personal, subjective, descriptive, inexpensive and it can be simply expressed." (1)

### The relationship with action

A research process based in action consists of asking questions about everyday practices so as to understand them better and, in principle, make the action more effective in relation to set goals. Or again, the research consists in methodically observing the everyday practices in order to describe them precisely, communicate them, compare them with others and eventually modify them. It is a question of recognizing or learning from action that assumes a setting at a distance, an analysis of the everyday action.

However, research that takes action as its object is not usually tied to the action. Generally, it is separated from it by its organization, personnel, goals, setting, timetable, language and style. The relationship with action implies the integration of the research activity in the literacy

organization, the meeting of the two activities' objectives, the same problem (the questions judged important), a common terminology or else an interaction between the two terminologies, as well as an interaction between the learners and the practitioners. The involvement of some or all of the participants in the research (practitioners, learners, coordinators, administrators, etc.) and in the related decisions is a *sine qua non* condition of program-based research.

Research tied to action is participant: the "actors" - those persons engaged in the literacy program - also become the actors in the research. They do not have a merely superficial role. The "researchers", who can be learners or organizers, are above all else participants. If they happen to be outside professionals, it is essential that they participate in the everyday life of the organization, that they become involved in working toward the same goal as the other community education workers.

Research tied to action is also involved activity. It is not neutral as scientific or professional research claims to be. The relationship of subject and object in the practice of the research implies an emotional, ideological commitment that is inevitably socio-political. The method and the ethics of this research do not require a distancing in terms of values, feelings and the struggles of everyday life. On the contrary, they are conditioned by the latter, at the risk of facing their contradictions and their extremes. The risk to be taken consists of trying to resolve these contradictions and to alleviate the extremes. This everyday research is carried out at the heart of feeling, thought and action in a real place and time.

The program-based research process assumes, moreover, that the organization where it is applied will function democratically. The organization must be self-sufficient enough to decide its own structure, to experiment with it and to change it as required. The decisions regarding the research matters (the methods, the time to be devoted to it, the resources to be invested in it, the persons to join the group if necessary, the nature of the expected outputs, their distribution, etc.) are taken inside the organization. This authority can be shared, but the imperatives of local action must guide the research process. Otherwise, one departs from the program-based research process.

Henri Desroches, of the Université coopérative internationale, has thought of program-based research simply in terms of these three aspects:

- it is aimed at the social players and their practices;
- it tries to transform spontaneous practices into considered practices, in principle more efficient;
- it is conducted, to various degrees, by the players themselves, who are objects and agents of the research (2).

Such a research practice, not so common in reality, must be able to be applied everywhere in literacy programs and in a permanent fashion. As James Draper has said, it is not only a possible option or an activity to be undertaken eventually if there is the time and the money. It should be an integral part of all the planning in literacy activities: "Research is as integral as teaching is to planning an education program." And it should be applied from the beginning to the end of the literacy process.



## **THE UNDERDEVELOPMENT OF RESEARCH TIED TO ACTION**

Literacy is an area that is relatively poorly researched. Much more resources are invested in sensitizing people and in publicity that celebrates the values of literacy, than in research; that is to say, in observing practices and questioning them, and in experimentation and evaluation. It is rare, for example, for people planning a literacy program to give any place to a global evaluation that would include the way the planning itself was done.

There is a popular view of illiteracy as a scourge and literacy activities as a blessing, if not an imperative. Social discussion on the subject is emotional and positive, but not very questioning. Although this kind of standard discussion favours the expansion of literacy activities as well as their annexation to the school system (with its advantages of professional literacy trainers and improved working conditions), such discussion nevertheless does not promote research or extracurricular experimentation.

Paradoxically, one could claim that the literacy movement, in Canada as well as in most industrialized nations, is still too young to have developed a recognized expertise and an active research field. The subject has emerged only recently among the general public and has not yet attained major political importance in all the provinces. On the other hand, there are many signs that would seem to suggest that the literacy movement is already mature. Its experimentation phase would seem to have ended. Following its introductory period which was able to justify the best experimentation and lots of leeway, came the organization, planning and expansion of the service, with their requirements for rationality, regulation and economy. From this viewpoint, if there is still research to be undertaken, it must essentially serve the ends of large organizations, the production of materials, planning, and feedback within the system. Down-to-earth research, which we call program-based research, participant research or participant experimentation, would no longer be given either priority or resources.

Between these two simplistic views -- the newness of the field or on the contrary, its maturity -- we can identify certain current situations that are not very favourable to the development of research tied to action. This will help us to better recognize the more favourable contexts and discover certain opportunities for creativity in the everyday practices of literacy.

### In voluntary organizations

In several regions of Canada, literacy training is assumed by voluntary groups. This type of organization is not generally favourable to the development of program-based research in local centres. There is a large turnover of volunteers, and as such, a great deal of energy is spent coordinating the recruitment and training of tutors (3).

When local groups are members of a much larger organization -- provincial, national or international -- the research function falls to the central body. For the whole of its network, the central body establishes training strategies for volunteers, provides educational materials, defines the ways local groups are structured and their relationship with the central body, etc. The functioning of local centres is standardized. In many respects, this situation is analogous to that of state institutions, as unfavourable to program-based research, as to the local centres' self-sufficiency.

Local groups are tending to become more professional as governments are taking on more responsibility in the area of literacy programs. This is so whether the groups are annexed to an institutional network, or whether they remain non-governmental organizations; in any case, they are recognized and subsidized by the state. In the first case, annexation to a school system is far from improving the conditions required for program-based research. In the second case, certain conditions must be present. We will return to this later.

### In educational institutions

In Canada educational institutions are now handling a large portion of literacy activities, whether from the perspective of general training, or of professional training, or both. In Quebec, for example, the school boards handle 90 per cent of the public's needs and resources in literacy. A uniform program, integrated in the school system (sanctioned by law) is managed by the Ministry of Education. The function of the practitioner is more and more blurred with that of the teacher. The goal of literacy is blended into that of the school - to complete the basic minimum training to qualify one for a secondary school diploma (4).

This situation, which we see in other Canadian provinces, does not help the development of research either at the local level or at the top, even if the material resources and work conditions have been improved. In this type of organization, the current research practice consists of giving research contracts to outside companies. The division of tasks among the different types of jobs, the hierarchy of roles and power, and the regulation of the system as a whole make program-based research difficult.

When some time for "research development" is included in a flow-chart or as part of the teaching time-table, there is little possibility that it will be devoted to a project of program-based research; that is to say, experimental action in a non-regulated setting. It may happen that researchers, teachers and administrators create favourable conditions for this type of research associated with an experimental approach to literacy training, with the institution's collaboration. But these initiatives are marginal and of short duration.

### In the ways it is represented

People's view of literacy is changing from that of a social action (either charitable or militant) to basic work force training in keeping with the actual requirements of the labour market, new technologies, etc. This shift in viewpoint is in turn accompanied by a change in research practices. People therefore tend to relegate the participant program-based research, associated with the trend of literacy consciousness raising, to the movement's introductory period. According to this current ideology, which favours functional abilities and technical training, the end results of such research, like the methodology of "consciousness raising", are now viewed as equally amateurish and utopian. If consciousness raising was in fashion in the social sciences at university, allowing relationships with community organizations, this is hardly the case any longer.

Planners and managers of training expect above all that research will suggest strategies, techniques and efficient instruments for training. In their view, practical research should follow the logic of the training market. Qualitative research, with broad objectives, fluid methodology, and sociocultural rather than instrumental functions, is relegated to the rank of social animation. According to most planners, not only does this type of research produce nothing useful, but it runs the risk of disorganizing things. This research would be dysfunctional in their view -- threatening to put things out of shape, rather than shape them.

### In attitudes

Certain other ideological factors, which account for the underdeveloped state of research in the professional milieu of literacy, can be seen in some typical attitudes -- for example, populism, activism and bureaucratic inclination. These attitudes are observed just as much among community activists as in the teaching environment.

Populism values above all else belonging, popular culture, talking and popular styles. It favours an emotional character and excludes all reference to other cultural practices, particularly those associated with the "bourgeois", with

academics or with students. This is also a major strategy of totalitarian-oriented power control within a group. A populist animator only tolerates competition if it is in his or her own anti-intellectual style.

Activism is very widely accepted among the militants, who believe in and are committed to the cause of literacy. By its very nature, research does not fit in at all well with the certainty and urgency of the activist goal. In a group where this kind of impetus is dominant, there is neither time nor energy to spend on research. In fact, the presence of students or researchers in the midst of the action is seen as interference.

Bureaucratic inclination appears as a very widely held attitude characterized by conformity to common sense and rendering the literacy counsellor's task routine. This attitude sees the teaching of reading and writing as uncomplicated, requiring certain approaches, some educational material, a little experience, some motivation on the part of the learner, some reasonable demands from the instructor's employer, and a good working environment. It means knowing how "to answer needs" in a comprehensive way and evaluate the task to the satisfaction of various officers. As such, literacy activities become viewed as being so simple that there would be no reason to disturb this professional well-being by a program-based research process. Everything in its place is this advocate's motto -- research in university, literacy in the classroom!

### In the status of literacy

The previously uncertain and undervalued status of literacy explains why, until now, only strictly minimal resources have been invested in it. The people declared to be "illiterate", are generally as poor as the individuals and organizations devoted to helping them. Literacy activities are too easily associated with volunteer work. Among academics, literacy activities have long been a subject of curiosity, rather than of research. Those who devoted themselves to such activities have done so most often voluntarily, and because of a personal commitment.

The steps program-based research has taken into the field of literacy are also characterized by this impoverished image of good will and intellectual generosity. In the academic community, as in the establishment, such steps are recognized only as having a humanist value that is above all emotional.

It is true that this devalued status is in the process of changing. For certain governments, notably in the U.S.A. and Canada, literacy has become a national priority. The industrial sector is increasingly concerned about basic

training of the work force. International Literacy Year has given rise to much media coverage which has not been without effect in the academic community, with employers, municipalities, etc. There will probably be a surprisingly higher number of research projects put forth under these circumstances, but also a greater amount of research commissioned by governments, educational institutions, the economic sector, etc.

If the situation described evolves toward larger investments in classic professional research (5), this would, however, still not seem to encourage the development of initiatives in program-based research. Nor would it help the development of self-sufficient literacy organizations, whose main subject of "research" remains (for most of the time) the means to survive. However, it is in these groups that steps in experimenting with program-based, participant research continue to be made.

## **FAVOURABLE CONDITIONS FOR PROGRAM-BASED RESEARCH**

Certain of the conditions unfavourable to program-based research in literacy have already been raised, disclosing by contrast, the conditions that are favourable. The ones that we will consider here are internal to local groups. As for the external conditions, it is necessary to keep in mind the most important one: support by governments of self-sufficient literacy strategies; in particular, support for research and experimentation in this field, in action, and not only research carried out at a distance by recognized institutions. This condition obviously has political implications, amongst others the fact that non-governmental organizations often find themselves competing with or in the same field as state institutions, notably schools. The political aspect of support for ordinary research will not, however, be developed here.

### Self-sufficiency

Self-sufficiency -- as opposed to independence – together with a self-managing internal structure, are essentials for the local group in relation to the large public and private institutions. In effect, the model of participant program-based research is incompatible with a structure that is hierarchical and bureaucratic. If in reality, self-sufficiency has never been acquired or established from the outset, it must be a major goal, as much for the sake of literacy as for research, and as much for the individuals as for the groups.

Self-sufficiency implies especially control over finances (at least partially), control over training in the team of animators but also as an objective among the participants, the production of the group's own teaching strategies and educational tools, and as such, experimentation and ongoing research.

### The resources

In order to introduce a program-based research process, one has to have the necessary means. Voluntary organizations, as we have seen, are not well-suited to an experimental process that requires time, appropriate personnel and the organizational, material and budgetary means which they do not usually have. Even if program-based research is less costly than officially recognized research, it still requires time, a budget for personnel, equipment, etc. Moreover, suitable and agreeable working conditions are also necessary to attract and keep competent individuals.

The matter of control over finances presents a problem that discourages many animators. It means that the team must be conversant with the granting policies, must master the art of

presenting projects, undertake public relations, and be innovative in the matter of job creation, etc. The program-based research process works itself through these steps, as in other activities.

Participation in federal government job development programs has enabled certain groups to equip themselves with micro-computers, and thus to improve administration; to introduce "CAL" (computer-assisted learning) in workshops; to test certain computer software and new teaching strategies; to produce more attractive documents on the spot, etc. (See below the example of "Lettres en main".)

### The personnel

The personnel profile is just as critical as is the animating team's style. The group's image or style can attract or repel just as much as the material working conditions can. We talked previously about the populist, activist and bureaucratic types of attitude. These attitudes are characteristic of the profile of a community education worker, but also of the way a team works.

There are no standardized criteria for the recruitment of personnel suited to work in an experimental context of literacy programs. A doctorate is not required just to participate actively with a team of people who are illiterate, or to be qualified to do so. As for individual traits, precision in work, linguistic ability, an experimental outlook, and cultural creativity are valued, for example. These selection criteria are the opposite of what the scholastic system tends to set up for enlisting personnel: a recognized professional qualification (a diploma) and years of service.

The team's composition determines the selection of community education workers. If they do not serve the purpose, it should be a simple matter to change things. It is necessary for a team to be stable, unified and varied in its abilities. The time and energy that are no longer put into meeting to air and settle conflicts, or in ideological debates or interpersonal rivalries, can be invested in research and experimentation.

### Outside collaborations

Collaboration with outside qualified personnel and well-equipped or prestigious institutions is useful in carrying out certain projects. It can be advantageous to entrust the technical coordination of a project to an external person, or even part of the research, like a publication, to a recognized institution. One can even associate as a partner or investigator, in a research project defined externally if the results can be taken and reinvested in internal activity.

Alliances with large institutions (research institutes, universities, government departments) are worthwhile - connections, prestige, subsidies, etc. -- insofar as the group's objective is not compromised and the process of managing its own internal affairs is not threatened.

### Written reports

Work about and in writing is at the centre of literacy activities and research in literacy. Written language and spoken language are not objects of learning above all else; they are objects of observation, of questioning, of discovery, of exercises, exchanges, experimentation, production, distribution...

In this cultural program-based research, the interaction of the animators and the participants is fundamental. The oral and written expressions of the two groups must be symbiotic, transformed one by the other. Therefore, a report or any other oral, written or visual production born of this interactive research in language cannot be like an academic production.

The writing of a research report, or drafting of a commissioned article, is commonly perceived as an obligation, a loss of time, a bureaucratic ritual or an element in an economic transaction. And the chore falls to the intellectual of the group, or is even put in the hands of someone outside (a form of scribe). This kind of written report is not at all favourable for experimental literacy programs. Such programs call for community education workers who learn to use writing for several purposes, on various occasions and in different ways. In other words, they enjoy playing with the language in this cultural range that we call literacy. This is accomplished in and through writing, with the help of its accompanying technologies. It can be done with the help of other workers-researchers in language: writers, poets, storytellers, etc.

### The methodology and techniques

The questions of research techniques and methodology have been deliberately omitted from this presentation of the conditions favourable to experimental action or program-based research. Scientific "know-how" is a part of the conditions for developing program-based research, as long as it is integrated and adapted to the everyday life of the literacy group. This transition is essential: from an objectively detached science to a science integrated with everyday life. The techniques and methods cannot be isolated from their usage or from the context in which they are used. This context aims to be different from that of the field of isolated research.



## **SOME EXAMPLES OF PROGRAM-BASED RESEARCH**

Despite the gloomy picture presented initially regarding the underdevelopment of literacy research, many program-based research experiences have occurred, especially in the community context and in that of popular education. The most numerous signs of this experimenting are found in Quebec where the popular literacy movement was particularly dynamic as far back as the end of the 1960s (6), and where since 1978, a collection of research works has supported this movement by aiding and making known the experiences of program-based research in literacy (7).

Four experiences are presented here. They apply to different activities in literacy practices: evaluation, experimentation in learning, the knowledge of participants, and the production of public awareness materials. Although these experiences are examples, we do not pretend that they are perfect. Above all they were well known to the author, are highly regarded and have the advantage of being treated in public documents.

### An evaluation

East End Literacy, a community group in Toronto, conducted in 1982-83, a global evaluation of its own strategies (8). This evaluation involved all participants, from the first phase to the conclusion; that is, from its conception to the final report. People from the four segments that made up the group -- students, tutors, personnel and board of directors - defined at meetings their expectations with regard to evaluation, decided the working method, collected information, studied the results and discussed the conclusions. The coordination of the process fell to an external person, although the final version of the report had to respect the group's collective form of expression and writing style.

Certain principles guided this process:

- to make possible the maximum participation in and control of decisions for each of the groupings and people involved, at all stages of the research;
- to share the essential values that guide the group's action, which also determine the criteria for description and assessment during the evaluation;
- to pay particular attention to the perceptions and expression of the learners: "one must find the evidence of a program's success in the changes that the learners themselves consider important in their lives" (p. 38);
- to attach more importance to the process of the evaluation than to the results.

What impact did this process have on the literacy group, according to the research conclusions? The initial meetings inspired the participants, gave them confidence and increased their sense of responsibility. Many ideas arose for a future structure for East End Literacy. The stage of collecting information reinforced the feeling of belonging to the group. It also brought about many discussions on the question of literacy. The stage of feedback from the results inspired a revision of priorities and led to new demands for action, with a stronger sense of acceptance of the program.

The principal results and the conclusions regarding future action were expressed as follows:

- it is important to make clear the model of East End Literacy and to make it known, so as to better develop exchanges within the network of literacy;
- flexibility is the highest value to aim for in the project;
- the training of tutors and their support need to be improved;
- to ensure the greatest progress for learners and assure them the chance of expressing themselves on all the subjects they consider important, the process of participatory evaluation must become continuous;
- the "crucial" change proposed is the establishment of a regular forum that permits communication between learners, tutors, personnel and the administration.

This evaluation experience permitted four sets of people to know East End Literacy better. It facilitated a much greater participation and provided opportunities for expressing opinions. It made possible various improvements in the program in response to needs and opinions expressed, and helped to make clear a model of how the group functioned. This more detailed knowledge and the published document should inspire changes in other groups and serve to develop a more efficient network.

#### An educational experiment

"Lettres en main", a popular literacy group in Montreal, introduced micro-computers in its workshops several years ago to carry out various experiments (9). The main objective of this innovation was to increase the effectiveness of participants' learning, to develop self-sufficiency, and to facilitate the transfer of acquired abilities into everyday life.

The research had, been initiated by the animators and the learners who participated on the board of directors. It consisted of methodically observing individual and group dynamics during the use of word processing, to compare these with regular workshops, to share these observations and discuss them at meetings, and finally, to experiment with new strategies adapted to each level of learning. It included a research-documentation and technical training phase for the team of community education workers, experimentation, a feedback phase, in the form of interviews with the participants, the participation of animators in seminars with outside groups doing similar experiments, the production of a research report, and ultimately, the production of an educational guide sponsored by a research institution specializing in computer-assisted learning.

The main points of importance arising from the research were:

- the development of more personalized learning strategies;
- the need to increase the number of computer learning stations as well as the time participants could spend using the machines;
- research into computer uses other than word processing, the preparation of a new experiment with more sophisticated computers (hypermedia);
- a more advanced computer training for certain participants to help in the training of those who are less literate;
- the development of a summary evaluation survey to learn more precisely the effect of literacy training at "Lettres en main" in the lives of former participants;
- the group's participation in the training of practitioners in computer-assisted learning, as well as in other research projects and other publications.

According to an animator interviewed, the program-based research process adds to all other activities, but is very stimulating for the team and for the participants. It helps to better unite the group. It enables the group to objectify its action, to reflect on it, to critique it and modify it. Writing about this situation serves a historic and documentary purpose. It is a valuable means of communication with the outside world; it provides a useful and stimulating stock of explorative knowledge. Above all, the research makes action more efficient. "It's worth the trouble. You leave without feeling done in. You feel better, it's stimulating."

### A dialogue with participants

This third experience of participant research was not initiated within a literacy group, but rather from the outside by a researcher engaged in the community literacy movement (10). It aimed to clarify and communicate the experience of a certain number of women registered in literacy courses. It was a discussion of life experiences which do not appear to correspond with what the practitioners say. The objective was to validate the participants' remarks to better demonstrate the need for adapting the literacy strategies of voluntary organizations to the expectations and realities of the learners.

"When I listen to women in the Maritimes talk about their lives, I see a world not captured by the usual discourse on literacy. The traditional focus on the importance of motivation as the key to participation in literacy programs, and the assumption that literacy is a unitary set of 'functional skills', does not reveal the experience of literacy which people have in their daily lives." (p.365)

Beginning with these observations, Jenny Horsman put together an enquiry around women in Nova Scotia registered in volunteer literacy groups. The enquiry's questions, put in the form of dialogue, were: How did these women perceive their abilities in reading and writing? How did they perceive their need for literacy training? How did they come to the point of asking for assistance? What were they expecting from it? The hypothesis or intuition to confirm was that what the women sought differed from the "functional needs" assumed by the tutors and the literacy group. There would be a gap between the participants' reality and the interpretation that the community education workers gave it. The research, based on what was said and not said, aimed to clarify this gap and to restore the right of speech to persons labelled "illiterate".

The method consisted of interviewing the learners and the instructors separately (and not bringing together all the players to try to unify their comments) to renew their enthusiasm and to make the action more efficient, as was the case in the experiences previously described. It brought about the initial reversal of a premise called into question by the practitioners - the illiteracy of their "clientele". In questioning the women separately about what they knew, about what they perceived, and what they believed without labelling them as distinct, they were no longer treated as patients, students or clients but as associates trapped in a literacy institution, as one can be by social assistance. The strategy consisted of turning a captive relationship around to discover a curtailed or hidden reality.

This type of research is more of an investigation or participant enquiry. It is involved, but from the side of the "participants" (who are not really so), refusing to reduce to a single reality the duality of practitioners and "illiterates". The process is externally controlled through solidarity with the oppressed who, even in literacy courses, do not "have the floor" (their "floor") or who are not heard. Its aim, in terms of action, is obviously the change of current practices. Its immediate objective is to demonstrate the importance of this initial dialogue. It can in effect change the essential objectives of literacy activities.

What are the principal points discovered by this research? Most women have not made the conscious choice to go into literacy programs, but have done so under pressure from social service agencies. Those who do not participate do not do so because of a "lack of motivation" but because of practical barriers in everyday life, often under the influence of their partner. Few women disclosed having problems "functioning" in their lives, even when they were recognized as "illiterate". The needs perceived by the women and those attributed to them were very different. Also very different was what they considered important for themselves in their lives and what the tutors declared to be "functional".

The most important thing for them was to find a sense of their life, which was what they found in literacy activities, rather than functional abilities or the value of literacy. Often, it was also to realize a dream less for themselves than for their children's future.

#### A production of awareness-raising documents

The final experience is known in current educational theory under the name of *project-based learning* which favours learning in the course of real activities, and not simulated or conceived solely for an educational situation. It relates to a project to produce a video to raise the public's awareness about illiteracy among young people, and about a model of literacy activities where young people are fully participant. This experience took place over three years in Longueuil, Quebec at "La Boîte à lettres", a popular literacy group for youth (11).

The team of animators gave themselves a primary objective: to help develop young people's verbal communication skills, for them to have a dialogue with the public, in an information/documentation process on the experience of illiteracy and the ways of overcoming it. To teach literacy and to learn literacy, over and above technical learning, consists of discovering the reality of questioning, speaking, making known, discussing -- all this in real actions, in the world and not in isolation. The research, for the animators,

consisted of reflecting on and guiding this action. For the participants, it consisted of producing the documents, so that they attained the expected goal -- to communicate to society an important message to make it easier for young people to leave the state of illiteracy behind.

Several means of communication were tried, which corresponded to various stages of the experience: writing and the publication of an information/awareness-raising text; the production of a scenario to turn into a video; the writing and publication of the life histories of the participants; and the production of an information pamphlet to insert in a local newspaper.

The first text was the product of collective writings from the animation team, produced day by day. The research consisted of conducting interviews with the participants, continually drafting observations on filing cards, getting together to comment on this material, sharing editing tasks, then gathering and coming together again as a whole. It aimed to understand the reality of young people in order to try to better respond to their needs. It also aimed to express this reality and the experience in progress in order to transform it and to find the necessary support. Several teachers/researchers contributed to the research as advisers and drafting assistants. But they stayed outside of "La Boîte à lettres", the team thus keeping total control of the experience which was getting ready for the next phase -- the production of a video by young people.

For the video, the young people were entirely responsible for the research and the production of the scenario, the organization of the production, the budget, liaison with the outside, etc. They were advised by the animators. They called on an outside firm to shoot the film. The young people participated in the film editing. They constituted an animation service to present the product to the public. They also participated in about 15 presentations at the community level: on television, at the university, in schools, etc. These presentations were the occasion for critical discussions on the image they had made for the public, and on the events it brought about. This experience was intense, long, difficult and exhausting.

The two other products tried to be more "educational"; they aimed themselves more strictly at the learning of writing. According to the animators, these inspired less enthusiasm and commitment on the part of the young people. "They felt that they were in a research process that was a little formal. They were not interested in either the newspaper or in writing."

This experience demonstrated the limits of young people's participation in program-based research, limits quickly attained, it seems, when this process leads back to written culture. But even when this process is oral and much closer to the participants' culture, as with the video, the development of verbal communication skills, which presumes a grasp of the language but also self-analysis in a process of voluntary change, quickly attains its limits. "We are always starting again from zero," concluded one of the animators, not without frustration. The visible results of literacy programs are less obvious than we generally pretend.

## CONCLUSION

Why is program-based research particularly useful in literacy activities? It is necessary to understand it as an integrated part of the act of reading and writing, if reading and writing are inseparable from understanding and communicating in a dialogue.

To seek out is also part of the learning of reading if "to read" is an exploration of meaning, and not simply a technique of functional decoding. The act of understanding consists of an exchange of meanings in a given dialogue. Writing permits communication at a distance, an extended dialogue in time and space -- taking the meaning beyond its immediate context. This particular technique of communication is essential to the research process. To learn to read and to write is also to learn to seek out, to say far more, to play with language; to change a certain order of things that is not very favourable to communication, oral as well as written. To see far more, to say far more, to give oneself other means of acting and of getting ahead as well as a little power over one's destiny or the imposed order -- these are the common objectives of research and of action in literacy.

The totality of literacy activities, which include program-based research, ends finally in cultural change for the participants, but also for community education workers -- for all of the participants. Such a notion is the antithesis of that which reduces language to an instrument, communication to a mechanism and learning to necessary conditioning. The aim of integrating research with action in literacy is for everyone to win some greater freedom. This is what is not so very ordinary! (12)

Program-based research must help us to do things, to do better. It also helps in the portrayal of reality. Action in literacy needs to push itself forward, to show itself off more. It is necessary that we speak, write and make it known -- this process that is so important to its follow-up. Program-based research gains by being transformed into another medium. Writing has the means and the power to portray reality, increasing its exchangeable value (13).

Therefore this very need to be publicized, which is linked with doing better and knowing more, also draws our attention to the limits of program-based research. It is difficult, for example, to acknowledge and publicize the fact that particular results of literacy activities are so-so, as we have observed, but with the perspective of time and objectivity, at "La Boîte à lettres" (14). That fact goes contrary to the assertions of the popular education movement and of its strategies of legitimization. One cannot question everything, write everything, publish everything; through solidarity, in the name of the values that justify action, through pragmatism...



To be able to assume more freely a more critical exercise of research, it is necessary to put oneself at a distance, to change one's objective and one's place of action -- to disengage oneself. This means, for example, doing what the author of the research on women's comments had to do -- to ask different questions and to pose them in another way than the literacy group might.

Program-based research assumes a compromise, a form of contract between research and action. When it chooses to bind itself to the goals as well as the values of action, it seals a pact with the everyday. This subject-object relationship is not destined to undermine the system or to jeopardize ordinary work. Given the participation in action and the researcher's engagement with the goals and values that are independent of the professional code of ethics of research, his or her particular role is to make clear these goals and values -- the socio-cultural conditions of action. To observe, to describe, to compare, to understand and communicate the elements of the context in which the action is decided and unfolds; to play simultaneously the roles of historian and theorist in a literacy group -- this is the useful function of the researcher in action.

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