Embodied knowing and measured deficits: Whose knowledge counts in adult literacy?

by

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Abstract

My dissertation examines the (dis)connections between current policy about the meaning and measuring of literacy and learning and the self-knowledge of adult basic literacy learners. In particular, it explores the importance of reclaiming learning as an embodied process in adult literacy education. Drawing on concepts from New Literacy Studies and Disability Studies my thesis explores how the prevailing norming practices in adult literacy policy discourse objectify and shame learners, treat them as bodies of deficiency, and obscure the embodied process of learning. I use Narrative Inquiry approaches that bring together my lived experience as a literacy practitioner and personal learning in critical feminist studies to examine learner experiences and the power relations embedded in teaching and learning. My fieldwork explores how adult literacy learners understand themselves and how they make meaning of their own literacy and learning. I contrast these embodied ways of knowing with the objectifying knowledge constructs used for measuring adult literacy within current policy structures and texts, and explore the impact of the gap between them.
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Chapter 1

Making Meaning in Adult Literacy

1.1 Introduction

This thesis is about the (dis)connections between the current policy approach to the meaning and measuring of literacy learning and the self-knowledge of adult basic literacy learners. The research investigates how literacy measurement regimes shaped by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)\(^1\) international adult literacy surveys have influenced national policies on adult literacy education in Canada, and how they impact programs and practices in adult literacy education classrooms, particularly the learning experiences of learners. I argue for the importance of reclaiming learning as an embodied process in adult literacy education.

As a way to enter into this thesis I will start with a story about an experience I feel exemplifies the focus of my research. My story below is adapted from a chapter I wrote at the end of July, 2013 called “Flooded with thoughts on literacy while bailing out in Calgary.” The original version is published in a professional development book for literacy practitioners in Canada called \textit{Stories from the Field} (Loschnig, 2014).

\footnote{1 The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development in partnership with Statistics Canada and the US Education Testing Services carried out the IALS (1994-1998) and ALL (2002-2006) surveys in over 20 member (industrial) countries for the purpose of producing large data sets that would inform the development of labour policies and economic competition. Canada sponsored the cost of the development of the ALL survey. The OECD also commissioned the third survey, PIAAC (2011-2013). As of 2009 there 28 countries planned to participate in PIAAC. In Canada PIAAC was carried out by Statistics Canada. (Thorn, 2009)}
I was in the midst of writing my thesis proposal when I decided that I needed to go to London England for a one-day symposium on adult literacy. It was a very long way to travel just for one day but the topic was so close to my own research I just had to go. So, on June 17, 2013, I found myself at the International Symposium on Literacy as Numbers: Researching the Politics and Practices of Literacy Assessment Regimes at the Institute of Education, University of London. I had prepared a poster presentation on the research I had done so far, which included a critical review of professional and policy documents, a review of scholarly literature, plus my personal archive of reflective journals from my years of working in adult literacy.

The poster was created as a collage of words and images that I felt represented the underlying tensions between the measurement language of the OECD IALS framework and words that represent literacy as social practices and wholistic approaches to learning. Words on the left side of the poster in the graph image represented literacy as measurable decontextualized skills. These words were selected from OECD, Statistics Canada and government documents, including examples of survey test items and background questionnaires. Words on the right side of poster in body image represented literacy as an embodied social practice and were selected from scholarly articles and books on New Literacy Studies (Figure 1).
Counting out who can’t be counted on:
The new norm in adult literacy

Figure 1. Poster presentation: Counting out who can’t be counted on: The new norm in adult literacy, presented at the Literacy as Numbers Symposium, London England, June 17, 2013.
The next day after the symposium I flew back to Calgary and my mind was filled with thoughts from all the provocative conversations, presentations, and discussions about the implications of large-scale measures (international skill surveys) on the meaning of adult literacy at both the policy and practice levels. It was definitely worth the journey.

I came home ready to dive into writing about my newly gained knowledge but, the very next day the entire neighbourhood where I was living had to be evacuated. A few blocks from our house the swollen Bow River was raging and it was rapidly flowing over its banks. We had to gather what we could, pets and all, and quickly move to higher ground. My suitcase was barely unpacked. I threw in some more clothes and my notes from the symposium. I somehow thought that I could keep my mind on all the new knowledge I had gained and find a place where I could settle into writing while waiting out the evacuation.

The next morning I stood on the hilltop looking down at the water surrounding my house. I could feel my mind shut down. The musings about the symposium were gone. I was overwhelmed with sadness. After a couple of days we were able to start bailing out the watery mess inside our houses. By the sixth day of seemingly never-ending cleaning and clearing out the muck and mud, it felt like my symposium immersion had been swept away with the floodwaters.

A month later the river had finally receded and was contained within its newly carved-out banks. I was determined to get my mind back to where it was before the flood. I wrote
this article as an attempt to paddle back to June 17th to remember what I was thinking, and feeling from my experience at the symposium. Much more than arguing about whether literacy is a human right or a set of human capital skills, the symposium was a forum to critically question what measurement is doing to how we understand what literacy actually is.

I remembered that during those first two intense weeks after the flood, there was a ton of information that flowed freely among my friends and neighbours about bailing water out of soggy houses, about how to prevent mold, and where to find disaster relief. After I went back to my work at the community college and the students started returning to the literacy programs, they talked about how they experienced the flood. Like me, they learned what to do through engaging with others. Written text was definitely part of this state of emergency, but we learned how to get and use information from multiple sources and in multiple ways.

As I reflected on this experience I saw parallels to how literacy works and also how standardized testing fails. In everyday life, using information from written texts (in print and digital form) usually also involves talking, listening and doing, all of which intersect with reading and writing. But standardized tests don’t capture such real-life scenarios. They can’t fully describe the cultural and social ways that people use written texts by being in relationship and in conversation with each other.
In the intensity of the aftermath of the flood I was fully engaged in all kinds of literacy social practices that involved reading and writing and talking and sharing. Without knowing the IALS ‘literacy levels’ of the hundreds of people helping each other in our waterlogged community, I witnessed over and over again that understanding and using written texts in meaningful ways happens in social relations. Reflecting on the emotional exhaustion I felt everyday while bailing out floodwaters and clearing out the muck, I gained a deeper understanding of the meaning of literacy as a social practice. The social is people, and the practice is doing, and people do things with and in their bodies in relation with text.

I also realized the power of emotion in such literacy social practices. After standing on the hilltop that morning and looking at my house and the entire flooded neighbourhood I went to the Red Cross disaster relief centre. When I got there I sat down at the table with the young volunteer who gave me a form to fill out for emergency accommodation. I immediately started to cry and I couldn’t fill out the form. Then the volunteer offered to help me get through the ‘paperwork’, and that was a social practice moment of literacy.

Immeasurable. (Gardner, 2014, pp. 11-15)

This story points to the crux of the underlying tension in the adult literacy field today: the contested meanings of literacy seen as either a set of decontextualized skills, mostly of importance in the labour market or seen as socially located practices of reading and writing as relational and patterned by social structures of inequality and power (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). Related debates about the meaning and purpose of literacy reach far back to its historical roots.
(Graff, 2013; Street, 1984). Underlying the various historical versions of these opposing views are divergent beliefs and values about knowledge and human worth.

### 1.2 Literacy, knowledge and shame

I began working in the adult literacy field in 2001 in Alberta, but I did not start in the classroom. I began working as a literacy practitioner in a community development project on improving access to community programs and services for adults who have “low-literacy.” The low-literate adult in this project was a figure of deficit, as represented in the statistical language of the OECD International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) that viewed literacy as socially decontextualized measurable skills (OECD & Statistics Canada, 2000). I resisted this narrative of deficit characterization of adults who have an uneasy relationship with reading and writing (Titchkosky, 2003). There is an underlying stigmatization in this narrative and an erasure of experience. Learners I have worked with over the years knew the feeling of the stigma of illiteracy, and all the other ways they did not fit in. Learners in basic literacy programs know a lot about shaming and stigma.

Early on I worked with basic literacy learners in a project called BLAST (Bureau of Literacy Alberta Student Speakers Team). It was a public awareness project and my role as facilitator was to help each learner on the team create their own story and speech, which they would present at different events to promote awareness of adult literacy education. The project aimed to honour their literacy learning and their own embodied knowledge. In other words, it aimed to value what learners have to say and what they know about learning. In the process of learning how to write their story the learners experienced overwhelming feelings of shame and worry about speaking
publicly. Bartlett (2007a) calls this literacy and speech shaming, and she argues that adult literacy learners experience shaming as “a cultural phenomenon” (p. 553-554). We didn’t use this term at the time, but we profoundly felt how deep shame resides in the body and how it silences voice.

All the learners had experienced discrimination and prejudice not only about their reading and writing but also about who they were. As a group we came up with the phrase, ‘You don’t have to relive your story in order to tell it’ as a way to challenge the internalized shame from social stigmatization and structured inequality and colonization. Learners were then able to use their writing as a form of resistance. It also became a way to reclaim their voice and their embodied knowledge to tell their story. Shame is often thought of as a noun but its force is known, experienced in the form of a verb; and it is always in relation with others (Bartlett, 2007a). In this thesis I argue that literacy shaming as experienced by individuals is reproduced through the deficit discourse of those distant surveying projects of the OECD.

From my experience as a practitioner and from doing my dissertation research I have come to see how international assessment projects not only produce certain kinds of narratives about the construct of low literacy, but also draw a profile of low literacy bodies. The OECD literacy assessments can be viewed as an enterprising project producing what has been called a measurement regime (Atkinson, 2015; Darville, 1999; Hamilton, Addey & Maddox, 2015; Pinsent-Johnson, 2015). This regime is held up by policy narratives that construct a ‘literacy skills crisis’ centered upon its notion of a new kind of society in industrial, northern countries. I perceived that the narrative produced by the OECD and its member countries at the turn of the
21st century was: the world is now a ‘knowledge economy’ and this new ‘age of information technology’ demands that workers – people – be more literate than ever before. The ‘crisis’ in this narrative makes the claim that far too many Canadian adults are literacy-deficient, reducing the country’s competitiveness in the neoliberal global economy (OECD & Statistics Canada, 1997, 2000).

The story of the globalized knowledge economy and the skills ‘deficit’ discourse created a frenzy in the adult literacy education field (Smythe, 2015). Most practitioners and advocates got swept up in this narrative tidal wave of the IALS claim and statistical ‘proof’ that 48% of adults in Canada are at “risk of social alienation and economic exclusion” (OECD & Statistics Canada, 1995, p. 22). But that story is not the stories of learners and practitioners in the adult literacy field, and this contrast is the subject of my research. This thesis investigates the relationship between these different stories from the standpoint of learners and, in fact, goes inside the body to wonder how individuals make meaning of learning to write and read in basic literacy education. Of course, all of these stories, from the individual to transnational levels are intermeshed, but their multiplicity and complexity has become obscured by narratives that hold together the dominant deficit discourse. The authors who produce and support the measurement regime of the OECD international literacy assessments are interested in only one single story: the ‘rate’ of adult literacy as a “national shame” (Walker & Rubenson, 2014, p. 158). This shaming story shows up in the bodies of learners in adult literacy programs, but it is not theirs in its making (Michalko, 2009).
In the following sections I outline basic literacy education as the location of my research. I describe my understanding of these programs including how assessment is viewed as integrated in the learning progress. I also analyze how learning is expressed through learners’ voices. Their understanding of learning is further explored in Chapter 5. In what follows I return to the measurement regime and describe in more detail how I came to understand it as a constructed “reality” (Druine & Wildemeersch, 2000, p. 402) that is centered upon assessment. I further examine such questions in Chapters 3 and 4.

1.3 My understanding of basic literacy education

My strongest interest is in programs at the basic literacy level that recognize the learner as a whole person and incorporate critical pedagogy approaches. The foundation stone of teaching with a consciousness of wholeness-of-person is recognizing the importance of learners’ embodied knowledge in the act of engaging in learning, and enacting that recognition by supporting learner-directed writing and creating narrative text. Teaching with a consciousness of wholeness-of-person is how I chose to work as an adult literacy practitioner. My philosophical values about teaching and learning are informed by Freirian critical pedagogy where education is understood as political, literacy is upheld as a human right and learning is a social transformative process (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Most of my work in adult literacy has been in Alberta where programs that are described as basic literacy serve adults with reading and writing and math skills up to the Grade 9 level. Sometimes these programs are called different names like basic education or basic skills, and are located in non-profit community organizations, colleges and school boards. The community organizations
offer volunteer tutor and classroom-based programs. They tend to have more learners who have minimum or no reading and writing skills than the college or school board basic education programs. Learners with minimum or no reading and writing skills are sometimes referred to as emergent readers or beginning readers. These terms originate in the field of children’s early reading, and most adult education practitioners prefer to use the term ‘basic literacy learner’ (Barton, 1994; Campbell, 2006, 2007; Campbell & Malicky, 2002; Duncan, 2009). Nearly all the community-based organizations and colleges in Alberta have multi-level classrooms for basic literacy learners with a range of reading and writing abilities. Learners in these programs have different life experiences and intentions for learning, but most have experienced social marginalization and systemic discrimination. The basic literacy programs and the learners that I have worked with provide the inspiration for this thesis. The participants in the research focus groups were learners in basic literacy programs.

Most community-based basic literacy programs in Alberta aim to use participatory approaches that support learners to actively engage in decision-making processes about their learning experience (Norton & Malicky, 2000). A number of practitioners I worked with view participatory approaches through a critical pedagogy lens where the process of learning is guided by questioning power in social relations, particularly the learner-educator relationship (Freire, 2011; Norton & Malicky, 2000; Ramdeholl, 2011; Tett & Maclachlan, 2008). I am most interested in educator-learner relationships where learners are supported to co-create the curriculum and are actively involved in the assessment of their learning. Unfortunately, this form of educational practice is increasingly hard to sustain for reasons I will explore in this thesis.
1.4 Assessment and learning in basic literacy education

I want to say a few words about how I have situated ‘assessment’ in this thesis. Although assessment was a constant presence in my inquiry, I need to stress that this study is not about assessment per se. Instead, I have examined those values and assumptions that privilege certain constructs of assessment over other ways of assessing learning in adult literacy. I am more interested in exploring the meanings people make about their own reading and writing and their own learning to read and write. I have explored how adults in basic literacy programs feel about themselves as learners and how they understand their relationship with written text. I also explored how learners make meaning of different kinds of formal assessments, from classroom tests to those distant OECD surveys. I have approached the term assessment with caution to avoid the assumption that assessment is only about measuring instruments and methods. That common way of seeing assessment obscures underlying judgments about people’s worthiness and value, and social structures of inequality and colonization.

Assessment in basic literacy programs is a pivotal issue as it encompasses a wide spectrum of not only tools and methods but also beliefs and values about the meaning of literacy and learning, and about learners (Campbell, 2007; Grieve, 2007). In these programs, assessment relies on the interpretive abilities of the practitioner to listen and pay attention to how learners feel about their learning and how they feel about assessment. Such interpretive abilities are most important in the initial assessment, as it lays the foundation for the learning relationship between learner and practitioner (Campbell, 2003, 2007; Grieve, 2007). I describe more about initial assessment in Chapter 5.
A number of recent studies on learners’ perspectives on progress and assessment (Jackson and Schaetti, 2014; Lefebvre et al., 2006; Looney, 2008) have found that participatory and dialogical approaches to assessment were more meaningful to basic literacy learners than standardized testing. Some jurisdictions have more structured systems, which do not encourage such approaches. For example, people applying for social assistance in Ontario are required to take a standardized literacy test if they “cannot prove that they have secondary education” (Atkinson, 2012, p. 8). However, even in jurisdictions with such prescriptive operations, most basic literacy practitioners tend to find ways to work around the rules in order to support learners’ engagement in learning and meaningful assessment (Smythe, 2015; Tett, 2014).

In most community based adult literacy programs it is common practice for practitioners to encourage learners to engage in self-assessment of their learning progress. Self-assessment involves learners reviewing and reflecting on their learning and identifying what they see as progress and change. Self-assessment is seen as important in one’s sense of learning, goal setting and self-identity (Jackson & Shaetti, 2014; Lefebvre, et al., 2006; Looney, 2008; Tett & Maclachlan, 2007). Many practitioners understand self-assessment as “central to effective teaching” (Looney, 2008, p. 58) and as something that “supports a learning environment that is tolerant of failure, experimentation, and inhibition” (Schaetti & Jackson, 2014).

During my thirteen years of experience as an adult literacy practitioner I observed that many learners, educators, and even administrators at some levels shared similar ideas about assessment: that assessment is primarily for the purpose of learning, and it is assessment for learning and of learning. However, with the privileging of IALS- type tests in the OECD
measurement regime (Pinsent-Johnson, 2013), I have also observed that in practice the relationship between assessment and learning may not actually be that simple and assessment may not primarily be either 'for' or 'of' learning. This leads me to ask: if assessment is not about learning, then what is it about?

1.5 Meeting the measurement regime

When I began working in the adult literacy field in Alberta I read a Statistics Canada (2001) report on the OECD IALS survey. It argued for policy-makers to make a “commitment to literacy and learning in every aspect of daily life” (p. 7) by “[s]trengthening community-based education and literacy programs” (p.29) and “[p]romoting access to adult education for all citizens” (p. 27). This seemed to be the same values for which adult literacy practitioners were advocating. I understood the OECD’s emphasis on literacy skills for the labour market as I worked my way through the sea of public and government documents on the ‘IALS data’. Yet, these reports seemed to also assert that literacy learning was important for people’s everyday lives “at home, at work or in in the wider community” (Statistics Canada, 2001, p. 26). What these texts conveyed to me at that time was that the policy-makers, provincially and federally viewed adult literacy learning for every aspect of daily life.

In my interactions with policy-makers and funders I listened to them talk about the social and economic ‘impacts’ of low literacy. I heard them talk about the need to raise literacy levels and say that they saw value in having a range of programs that recognized the diversity of learners. However, over time it became clear that the policy-makers and funders were more concerned with measurement tools that could speak the language of the OECD IALS assessment
framework. I was aware of policy-makers’ and funders’ arguments about accountability and the need to produce evidence of program results and learner progress. I was also aware of the underlying tension between labour market concepts of literacy as skills and the social practices approach that sees literacy as relational and multifaceted socio-cultural context. I will discuss such tensions in Chapters 2 and 3. But when I began working in adult literacy in 2001 I, along with other practitioners with whom I worked, assumed that this tension was just a ‘normal’ part of the diverse adult literacy field. It was not obvious to myself, or to many other practitioners and advocates, that the increasingly contested territory of adult literacy was already coming under an ideological global-market measurement regime that would eventually re-invent the meaning of literacy education for adults in a manner that would put basic literacy learning at risk.

I borrow the term ‘measurement regime’ from Hamilton, Maddox & Addey’s (2015) Literacy as Numbers: Researching the politics and practices of international literacy assessment. I understand this term to mean an arrangement of ideological and institutional practices that construct a view of the world through assessment technologies and quantification language and meaning. Gorur (2015) describes this type of regime thinking as, “measurement through ‘world-making’ practices” (p. 9). She goes on to explain that, “[t]he act of measurement sets in motion a series of changes to the situation, thus changing the very reality it purports to measure” (p. 9). Gorur (2015) proposes, and I agree, that these transnational OECD measurement projects are not just population surveys of literacy skills to inform labour market policy. In fact, the ‘act’ of conducting these surveys has been a re-production and re-invention of the meaning of literacy education for adults. Measurement as an institutional construct values objectified scientific knowledge over individual/personal knowledge and local, cultural contexts. Institutional
measures are made up of standardized testing and categorization assessment structures that rely on technical expertise, complicated technology, and statistical language. Measurement of adult literacy is about making judgments about people’s literacy and about people themselves to serve the purpose of the owners and directors of the measuring project, not the measured subject.

1.6 Assessment over learning in the measurement regime

The Canadian federal government was a leading partner and funder of this unfolding large-scale standardized assessment enterprise. The IALS authors, some of whom were in leadership positions in Statistics Canada, saw it as an opportunity to bring a stronger labour skills agenda to adult basic literacy education (Pinsent-Johnson, 2013). Statistics Canada (1996) claimed that the IALS test was an exceptional international measure of adult literacy skills capable of producing “comparable literacy profiles across national, linguistic and cultural boundaries” (p. 9). Gorur (2015), however, cautions against seeing this testing measure as universal and objective; instead, she suggests “understanding measurement not as a single event, but as a historical achievement” (p. 11). By the time the first IALS survey was initiated in the early 1990’s the Canadian government had already invested extensive resources in the construction of the full project, including dedicated, government-supported expert committees, statisticians, specialists and surveyors, data analysis technologies and partnerships with provincial and international governments (Pinsent-Johnson, 2014).

Across Canada provincial policy-makers began to apply the IALS to the adult literacy education system. I noticed that practitioners, myself included, began to take up the policy discourse and statistical language, for example by referring to learners as IALS Level One and Level Two.
These were the lower levels on the IALS 500-point scale that were described as indicating literacy skill deficiencies. Levels One and Two were grouped together as the focus of policy attention because they were below the much discussed “Level 3 threshold” (Greiner et al., 2008, p. 20) of proficiency considered adequate for modern life (see Chapter 3 for more on this). In my experience the IALS scale and levels were the axis of a new way of talking about literacy. Policy-makers and the authors of IALS argued that it introduced a new common language about literacy (Grek, 2015). Gorur (2015) describes this new language as “number-making” (p. 13), where “reliance on numbers” (p. 14) was, increasingly, becoming the single narrative of literacy. The authors argued that having a range of levels across a continuum was an advancement over using school grades to indicate achievement and was less judgmental than the illiterate-literate dichotomy.

The implication of this creeping discursive shift of ‘literacy as numbers’ (Hamilton, Maddox & Addey, 2015) was not immediately obvious to me, or many practitioners I worked with. Although some practitioners in Alberta questioned the suitability of using an IALS-type assessment in basic literacy, their concerns were drowned out by the growing IALS narrative that was swiftly reframing the broader adult literacy field (Walker & Rubenson, 2014). In Canada the introduction of the IALS framework and tests led to a cascade of changes that were designed to ensure a new kind of certainty with the use of standardized measurement. I remember experiencing a growing dissonance as I found myself partaking in a new IALS ‘number-making’ narrative about the need for better accountability and assessment, about individual deficits and national economic crisis, and mostly about the need to know more about the “precise
characteristics of the deficits of the low skilled population” (OECD & Statistics Canada, 2011, p. 309.)

1.7 Starting with my embodied knowledge

As this thesis is an effort to craft a narrative about the importance of embodied understanding of learning in adult basic literacy education I will now turn to locating myself in the story that eventually led to this research. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and other adult education scholars have discussed the importance of using autobiographic approaches to locate oneself as researcher within the research field (Brookfield, 2011; Jones, 2015). In this section I reflect on my own experience as a learner and teacher. My childhood memories of literacy, as reading and writing, are mostly in relation to schooling, even though traumatic experiences outside of school influenced my experiences in school and how I understood myself as student. The most pervasive memory of my school experiences is emotive. I remember being afraid. I was especially afraid in the classroom. I felt like I could not learn and did not fit in.

Growing up in Scotland, I remember the strap, humiliation, silence, pencil, embarrassment, desks, stupid, paper and hunger. There was so much to fear within the confines of the classroom. Outside the classroom, however, I remember feeling excitement as well as trepidation in the school hallways, playground, and dinner hall. I remember the girls’ side and boys’ side of the playground, friends and enemies, custard, cold knees, peas and potatoes, and running as fast as I could. I spent a lot of time playing outside; that’s where I felt most free. I loved playing with my friends, we would go to the harbour and catch crabs when the tide went out. I’d go to my Auntie’s house for biscuits, even though I didn’t like my big cousin. He hurt me. At home, I
remember not being interested in reading; reading was hard. We did not go to the library, because children make too much noise. Driven into me from early childhood was the absolute necessity of getting an education. To fail at school was shameful.

When I was nine years old, my father died suddenly, and within months my mother brought me and my brother and sister to Canada. I remember Grade 6, suburban houses, wrong accent, loud students, not fitting in, wrong answer, Kraft dinner, wrong clothes, and fear of almost everything, especially being asked a question by the teacher. I remember high school, low academic stream, one teacher’s belief in me, phys-ed and periods, cheating, sexual danger, failing, and fear of getting caught. At home, I remember being afraid of my mother’s demands, fed by striving to be middle-class, that I must not get pregnant, must finish college, and must get married. I remember college and dropping out, the pressure to conform, shame, questioning my identity, and fear of being straight. During my childhood and adolescence I did not see myself as academically successful even though I progressively improved through high school and eventually finished college. I did not make the connection between my childhood experience of abuse by my cousin and the internalized feelings of shame that made me feel ‘not very smart’. I remember feeling like I had to pretend that I had no problems at school. From my childhood I learned that the social meanings of literacy and education are bound together by forces of social oppression and violence, which I felt but could not articulate. I also learned that being educated meant being civilized and that white Anglo-Saxon people, like me, were the most civilized. I don’t remember the word literacy, but I do remember “illiterate” and I knew enough that nobody would want to be that.
Years later, I remember university, loving what I was reading, finding feminism, learning about Indigenous politics, learning why history matters, believing I could write, coming out queer, and finally feeling smart. I remember teaching junior high school and having the resurgent feeling of being silenced and not fitting in. I remember working in community-based organizations and experiencing learning through social justice activism. It was in community work that I began to think about learning as embodied visceral knowledge where emotion and intellect are inseparable. I began to notice that learning — discovery, making sense, making meaning — happens in relation with what is already known and felt and in relation with others. I was a community educator teaching sexual health and anti-homophobia education to youth and young adults. Many were in and out of school, some were homeless, and some worked in the sex trade. I learned about Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2011) and used popular education approaches to teach sexual health, HIV prevention and harm reduction, but I did not have an articulated sense about how literacy structured social inequality.

Looking back, I only remember a few instances when literacy itself was apparent. Part of my job was to work on a community health bus that went around to all the sex worker strolls. My job was to chat about sexually transmitted diseases, hand out condoms, make hot chocolate, and provide referrals and any other information that people were interested in. One night, two young women came on the bus. One woman did not talk and the other woman spoke to her in gestures. I went to say something but the woman said that her friend was deaf. I then tried to write to communicate, but the woman said her friend didn’t know how to read or write. She said that they always worked together for safety. I offered them both hot chocolate and condoms but was unsure how to communicate. Other times in my work when literacy — (il)literacy — appeared
was usually when I offered written material and some people said that they would rather just talk, that they remember better that way. The momentary barrier of printed text was felt with a tinge of shame, embarrassment, and an awkward smile on my part.

I returned to school again to get a Master of Education because I felt I needed to learn more about community education and non-profit management. During this time, I began working in a community development project on adult literacy. It was my entry-point into the field of adult literacy and I gladly turned the focus of my Master’s studies toward this area of education. Although I had completed teacher training and been an educator for ten years, my orientation to adult literacy was affected by my own embodied knowledge about what illiteracy felt and looked like. Because the project positioned adult literacy as an issue of accessibility, I saw connections to human rights and social inclusion. I intuitively sensed that the constructed notion of literacy was instrumental in systemic inequality in relation to class, race, disability, and gender. When I began working with learners, memories of my early teaching experience came flooding back. Before working in community education, I was a teacher in a junior high school in a small town in Alberta. I was assigned to teach the special education language arts class and I learned how much the students understood their marginalized location in relation to “normative expectations” (Collins & Ferri, 2016, p. 3). Ten years later, it felt as though I was meeting the same students, who were now adult learners. My learning curve in adult literacy was like an exercise of reflection, discovery and challenge. Over a long period of time I aimed to balance my own history of embodied knowledge about the social positioning of literacy with all the new information I was gathering on adult literacy.
The new information came from a few sources: working with other practitioners and learners in basic literacy programs and research projects; courses and independent studies in the masters’ program; and, public media and various reports and material on the OECD IALS. A number of national and provincial organizations on adult literacy had also produced reports and information that highlighted the results of IALS, such as the Movement for Canadian Literacy (MCL) Fact Sheet Series (2000-2004). Many of these documents repeated the finding that nearly half of all adults in Canada had ‘deficient’ literacy, and it seemed as though the entire field took up the IALS results without question. Working with literacy practitioners I learned that adult literacy education was mostly part-time and community-based programming, and that literacy practitioners were very committed to the process of teaching and learning. Working with learners I was able to further my practice in critical pedagogy (Freire, 1991, 2011). There was also a growing movement of practice-driven research that drew heavily on New Literacy Studies. It seemed there was a plethora of activity and investment in adult literacy and I gleaned as much as I could from every possible source. I felt I had come full circle in my own trajectory of learning. However, I recognized quite early on that there was tension and misfit between the IALS statistical narrative and what learners and practitioners knew about learning and teaching literacy. This thesis has largely emerged out of that tension.

1.9 Overview of the chapters

In Chapter 2 I explore the primary theoretical and methodological resources I have used for this research journey: Disability Studies, New Literacy Studies and Narrative Inquiry. My rationale for bringing together these scholarly influences is grounded in my lived experiences in adult literacy programming, research and politics, and my desire to engage in a process of “crafting
narratives that will subvert and resist this dominant discourse and ultimately better serve the interests of adult learners” (Sandlin & Clark, 2009, p. 1026). In particular, from New Literacy Studies I have drawn the central tenets of seeing literacy as social and learner as knower; from Disability Studies I have been inspired by its interrogation of the hegemony of normalcy; and, from Narrative Inquiry I have drawn courage and guidance in using personal stories, both my own and others’, as legitimate research findings. All this has allowed me to explore teaching and learning issues in adult literacy education that are increasingly overlooked and under-valued.

Chapter 3 traces the expansion and retraction of adult literacy education in Canada from the 1980s to 2016. I begin by examining the build-up of the field including the establishment of the federal government’s National Literacy Secretariat and the beginning of large-scale standardized literacy surveys. I examine the period of expansion of practitioner-driven research and capacity-building bolstered by the social practice theories of the New Literacy Studies. Concurrently, I investigate the Canadian government’s role in the production of the IALS and Essential Skills Framework. Drawing on Disability Studies thinking I consider the ease with which the normalization of the OECD measurement regime produced a modern version of the literacy deficit discourse. The final section considers the retraction of adult literacy education, particularly the curtailing of basic literacy programs between 2006 and 2016.

In Chapter 4 I examine the disconnection between the literacy policy discourse, which I argue focuses mostly on deficit, and how learners understand themselves and make meaning of their learning and literacy. First I examine the discursive production of adult literacy learners as deficit characters in the measurement regime. Then I turn to the voices of participants in my
research to consider how learners’ embodied knowledge gets re-invented as deficit and detrimental social outcomes in the technological language of literacy as numbers (Gorur, 2015). I drew on Bartlett’s (2007a) interrogation of the social construction of literacy and speech shaming and how this conceals policy and social norming practices of inequality and oppression. I conclude the chapter by arguing that, as a normalizing project, the measurement regime needs the deficit character, regardless of its prejudicial disavowal of learner’s embodied knowledge (Graham & Slee, 2008; Titchkosky & Michalko, 2009).

Chapter 5 further explores the significance of paying attention to the embodied knowledge of learners in the context of power relations. I draw on the concept of ‘embodied knowledge’ used by scholars in adult education, the humanities, fine arts and health, including Horsman’s (2006) important investigations of violence, trauma and shame. I suggest using story as a way to explore how embodied emotion and knowing are persuasively present in the literate act and in the process of learning to read and write. I examine the social and political positioning of reading over writing as a form of social ordering, and how this continues today in the measurement regime of international assessments (Atkinson, 2013a; Brandt, 2009). I conclude this chapter by arguing that learning to write is one way of resisting the normalization of the deficit-literate character.

In Chapter 6 I reflect on the iterative process of my research journey. This concluding chapter begins and ends with reflections on what I have learned through the process of doing this research. In the section called ‘Plotting the Narrative’ I provide a summary for each chapter, then I outline what I hope this research contributes to adult literacy scholarship. I then suggest
possibilities for future research on embodied knowledge and Freirian philosophical approaches to learning. I describe my two hopes: that literacy practitioners will find this research to be relevant, and that my exploration of ‘learning begins in the body’ resonates with their own embodied knowledge of their practice. I also suggest a rediscovery of practitioner research and recommendations for future possibilities and challenges in adult literacy policy development. I close this chapter by reflecting on my embodied learning and knowledge including my deepening understanding of how technical-doing and emotional-doing are interwoven in learning to write and read.
Chapter 2

Crafting the Narrative

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I explore the primary theoretical and methodological resources I have used for this research journey. I discuss the evolution of my research questions and give an overview of my data collection and analysis process. I discuss how I have used Disability Studies, New Literacy Studies and Narrative Inquiry. My rationale for bringing together these scholarly influences is grounded in my lived experiences in adult literacy programming, research and politics, and my desire to engage in a process of “crafting narratives that will subvert and resist this dominant discourse and ultimately better serve the interests of adult learners” (Sandlin & Clark, 2009, p. 1026). In particular, I have drawn from New Literacy Studies the central tenets of seeing literacy as social and the learner as knower (Barton 2009; Hamilton, 2002, 2012; Tett, Hamilton & Crowther, 2012; Tett & Maclachlan, 2007). Disability Studies has inspired me with its interrogation of normalcy (Davis, 1995, 2002; Graham & Slee, 2008; Titchkosky & Michalko, 2009). I have drawn on narrative to explore steps I have taken to conduct this research, which means I have tried to show the interplay of relationship, power and language in narrative descriptions and stories about experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). All this has allowed me to explore teaching and learning issues in adult literacy education that are increasingly overlooked and under-valued.

2.2 New Literacy Studies

New Literacy Studies emerged from academic disciplines interested in language and linguistics, human communication and social relations. The theoretical beginnings of New Literacy Studies
are credited, among others, to three significant studies in the 1980’s (Heath, 1983; Scribner and Cole, 1981; Street, 1984) which introduced new socio-cultural and socio-psychological ideas about how literacy is conceptualized and enacted within social contexts. These scholars established the foundational concept that literacy is social. Prinsloo and Baynham (2008) describe their ethnographic research in anthropology, socio-linguistics and socio-psychology as ‘first generation studies’ that cemented two initial key concepts: the literacy event (Heath, 1983) and literacy practices (Street, 1984). Following these studies Barton’s (1994) *Literacy: An introduction to the ecology of written language* and Barton and Hamilton’s (1998) *Local Literacies: Reading and writing in one community* provoked new thinking about the socio-relations that people have with text and focused attention on how text itself has socially-mediating roles.

Barton and Hamilton (1998) created a number of propositions that came to be seen as central to New Literacy Studies:

1. Literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these can be inferred from events, which are mediated by written texts.
2. There are different literacies associated with different domains of life.
3. Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies become more dominant, visible and influential than others.
4. Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices.
5. Literacy is historically situated.
6. Literacy practices change, and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making. (p. 7)

More recently, Prinsloo and Baynam (2008) have added another proposition:

- The ways in which people use and value reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity and being. (p. 2)

These propositions say to me that understanding literacy as social practice means that people are in relationship with texts and with one another. It also says to me that these social and energetic relations are pervasive, particularly in cultures that highly value written language in printed and digital forms. Written texts, their production and reproduction, interpretations and usage occur in power relations and the constructs of knowledge and identity are formed, in part, by written texts. I also want to point out that constructs of literacy can become abstracted from what I understand to be a fundamental meaning of the word literacy: reading and writing words, sentences, letters and numbers. I understand literacy to imply learning to read and write letters, words, sentences and numbers, to know how to use and make meaning of this written language.

By emphasizing the sociality and multiplicity of literacies situated in the local and the subjective experiences of people, New Literacy Studies “achieved a paradigmatic shift in the study of literacy” (Kell, 2009, p. 75). Through the accumulation of ethnographic studies, New Literacy Studies scholars offered an alternative to behaviourist and functionalist views of literacy that evolved from the racialised Great Divide theories of literate and non-literate, oral and written, civilized and non-civilized (Gee, 2000; Graff, 2013; Reder & Davila, 2005; Street, 1984). However, New Literacy Studies has also been criticized for its nearly exclusive focus on the situated local context. Brandt and Clinton (2002) ask, “Can we not see the ways that literacy
arises out of local, particular, situated human interactions while also seeing how it also regularly arrives from other places – infiltrating, disjointing, and displacing local life” (p. 343)? Other New Literacy Studies scholars looked to ideas of translation and symmetry from Actor Network Theory (ANT) to extend the ethnographic lens from local events to complex literacy practices across political and cultural space and time (Brandt & Clinton, 2002; Hamilton, 2001, 2009, 2012a; Kell, 2009). Hamilton (2012a) uses ANT to join up the local and the distant by tracing learner’s voice from student-centered writing projects to public circulation of edited learner testimonials. She notes that the translational moments such as a teacher editing written work by a learner, “raises the issue of authority of relations and the power of different institutional processes to shape and reshape marginalized voices” (p. 76). I had considered such ideas from Actor Network Theory for this thesis, however I was drawn more to narrative inquiry approaches to analysis, which I discuss later on in this chapter.

New Literacy Studies provide a solid theoretical under-footing for my thesis research in several ways. It views literacy within daily social and cultural practices that are intimately related to conceptions of knowledge and identity. New Literacy Studies scholars argue that these practices are historically situated in time and place, and connected with distant socio-cultural spaces. They also note that peoples’ interactions and meaning making with and through literacy are patterned by social institutions and power relationships (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Collins and Blot, 2003; Prinsloo and Baynam, 2008). Hamilton (2002) notes that New Literacy Studies thinking, … places at centre stage people’s own definitions of literacy because there is no one standard that is valid for everyone, for all time. This means exploring both as
teachers our own starting points, and with students their starting points and assumptions about literacy. (p.2)

Extending this last point, it is important for educators to explore our own starting points and assumptions specifically about learning, and about the interconnections of literacy and learning. I understand Hamilton as pointing toward the significance of the relationship between learners and educator and this relationship is primarily about learning. What the learner and the educator know and feel about their own learning as well as their own assumptions about how people learn influences the power dynamics of the learning process they engage in with each other (Tett & Maclachlan, 2008). I further discuss the learner educator relationship in Chapter 5.

I am drawn to New Literacy Studies because it aims to disrupt socio-political power structures directing the construct of ‘being literate’, and it does this through critical analysis that is positioned from the learner’s knowledge and experience with forms of written texts. Some New Literacy Studies scholars emphasize what Barton (1994) names as Freire’s starting point for understanding literacy, namely “the inequalities in the world which foster illiteracy…Literacy teaching begins with a critical examination of society and of the participants relationship to it” (p. 27). Others, such as Ramdeholl (2011), argue that Freirian ideas are key elements in New Literacy Studies ontology. Those ideas such as literacy in relation to oppression (the oppressed), learning as critical reflection (conscientization and praxis), and learning as leading to social change (liberation) are embedded in the propositions noted above (Atkinson, 2012; Crowther & Tett, 2011; Player, 2012; Street, 2012). Barton (1994) also notes that, “critical literacy links up with critical theory… subjecting the term literacy to examination, analysis and deconstruction” (p. 27). I understand Barton’s connection of critical literacy to critical theory to suggest that it is
useful to consider literacy as contested, and always produced in “socially interested and politically motivated constructions” (Bartlett, 2008, p.742). The contested purpose of adult literacy education is further discussed in Chapter 3.

2.3 Disability Studies

I learned about Disability Studies at the beginning of my PhD program when I took a course called ‘Doing Disability in Theory and Everyday Life’ with Tanya Titchkosky. This course not only invited me to examine my own assumptions about how I came to know disability, but also strongly influenced how I was thinking about literacy. Similar to my learned assumptions about literacy, described in Chapter 1, I also came to understand how the meaning of disability is made through social relations and experiences. As a child I learned that disability meant ‘other’. I remember my mother’s firm warning to ‘do not stare’ when I would see a disabled person. I learned that any bodily condition or even behavior that was deemed to be outside the normal ways that people were supposed to act and look like was to be shunned. Like the notion of illiteracy, I was taught very early on that nobody wanted to be disabled or different.

In this course I read Graham and Slee’s (2008) chapter “Inclusion?” in Disability and the politics of education: An international reader. Their chapter on inclusion and inclusive education discussed some concepts that resonated with me. Graham and Slee posit that the discourse of inclusion constructs ‘others’ who are necessarily excluded to the social margins and presumably desire moving towards the centre. Graham and Slee’s (2008) deconstruction of the centre “from which exclusion derives” (p. 84) helped me to see how power is used in “discourses and practices” (p. 94). I could easily take more time to consider Graham and Slee’s (2008)
interrogation of the normalizing discourse and practices about inclusive education as I see that language is used in similar ways in the adult literacy field, however that could easily be another thesis in itself. For this thesis, I want to keep my attention on what I am learning about how they, and other Disability Studies scholars, analyze language to question how meaning-making about literacy happens.

Graham and Slee (2008) draw on Derrida’s notion of ‘absence of centre’ and Ferguson’s notion of ‘power exercised from a hidden place’ to propose that the discourse of inclusion produces an image of a “ghostly centre” (p. 89) (italics in the original). They argue that the ghostly centre is held up by “individuals in positions of power who gaze from the vantage of privilege [and] set the parameters of normality” (p. 89). The suggestion that the desired centre is illusory or ghostly presented a way to consider shifting policy discourse in adult literacy education about learners and basic literacy programs. In the measurement regime, literacy programs are re-invented as skills training sites and learners are re-embodied as knowledge economy workers. The aspired ‘knowledge worker’ is able-bodied, literate, trainable, white, and masculine (Graham & Slee, 2008). The concept of the ghostly centre offered me a way to critically question the dominant discourse of the OECD assessment projects that emerged in the adult literacy field in Canada in the mid 1990’s as discussed in Chapter 3.

Graham and Slee (2008) also draw on Derrida’s concept of ‘writing under erasure’. I understand this to mean intentionally drawing attention to the word(s) that are not good enough, but are necessary, and so the word(s) remain visible to indicate this meaning. In Reading and Writing Disability Differently, Titchkosky (2008b) quotes Stiker, “the disabled person is integrated only
when the disability is erased” (p. 175). Michalko (2009) challenges the up-take of the term ‘persons with disabilities’ arguing that “… privileging personhood over disability is to conceive of disability as the excess that ‘takes over someone’s life’ and prevents someone from being ‘like everyone else’” (p. 69).

Accordingly, by applying the practice of ‘writing under erasure’, a striking out of the words ‘with disabilities’ makes visible the rejection of disability, but the scored words remain in order to make clear what is not good enough. Disability Studies scholars and other historians have argued that gazing upon the erasure of disability is a long-standing cause of normative special education, medical science and social hygiene movements (Erevelles, 2000; Davis, 1995; Gabel, 2005; Malacrida, 2009; McLaren, 1990). In these histories the role of both literacy and general education can be understood as tools of social control “aimed at inculcating the moral norms and disciplines of the ruling class.” (Street, 1984, p. 108).

The concepts of erasure, normalcy and other in Disability Studies galvanized my attention because I saw its relevance to the field of adult literacy education. Disability Studies is important because of how it begins by rejecting the historical individualization and medicalization of disabled people and insisting on a social model that firmly re-locates disability outside the body and in the social as an issue of discrimination and stigmatization of disabled people (Oliver, 2009). Building on the social model of disability scholars in humanities and cultural studies as well as those in social sciences have drawn upon critical theory, post-modern and post-structural thinking to deconstruct the normative notions about disability, body, and normalcy itself (Davis, 1995; Graham & Slee, 2008; Mitchell & Snyder, 2006; Michalko, 2009; Shakespeare, 2006;
Titchkosky, 2008b). A number of scholars have added ‘critical’ to their research, to articulate a Critical Disability Studies (Goodley, Hughes & Davis, 2012). All of this work has contributed to a growing field of critical analysis regarding what Garland-Thomson (1997) coined as ‘the normate’ which she defines as “the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them” (p. 8). Garland-Thomson and other researchers emphatically agree that Disability Studies, critical or otherwise, is about dismantling the “cultural script” (Michalko, 2002, p. 98) of normalcy.

Disability Studies encourages people to deconstruct notions of normalcy in order to “think with disability in its making” (Michalko, 2009, p. 66). It turns the spotlight from the disabled individual as object by asking pointed questions about what is happening in the (social) appearances of disability as it is produced. As Titchkosky (2008b) explains, “Disability Studies attempts to treat seriously one particular and inescapable fact: whenever disability appears, it appears in the midst of other people. Disability is, therefore, a social and political phenomenon and should be studied as such” (p. 37-38). Titchkosky & Michalko (2009) also point out that Disability Studies “mark[s] an occasion to interrogate what we ‘normally’ think of and experience as ‘normal life’. After all, it is the taken-for-granted character of ‘normal life’ that generates disability in the first place.” (p. 7). I am suggesting that normal life includes the prevailing discourses on adult literacy as detrimental and deficit.

In the dominant discourses adult literacy and disability are constructed as social and political problems. Disability is a problem in an able-bodied world and adult literacy is a problem in a
knowledge-based society. The social location of the ‘problem’ is a construction of dominant narratives of individualist, medical and human capital models, [based on scientific claims that both are problems of individual deficit causing individual suffering (Bartlett, 2007a; Michalko, 2002). Disability and literacy are made to be ‘things’, objects that can be studied, measured, and categorized for the purpose of remediation.

I am drawn to Disability Studies because it shows how to interrogate “normalcy… as the paramount reality” (Michalko, 2009, p. 70) from a socio-political standpoint to “think with disability in its making” (p. 66). I understand the notion of ‘thinking with’ as getting up close in embodied ways to have a sense of what is happening in the making of disability and, I suggest, in the making of adult literacy. I have borrowed Disability Studies concepts about deconstructing notions of normalcy as a way to learn how to notice and question norming practices in the ‘making of’ adult literacy, which I argue, is partly produced in the making of learners as literacy deficit characters. I discuss the making of the deficit character in Chapter 4.

This thesis is not about disability per se, yet in my experience many learners in adult literacy education are understood as disabled or are produced as such by receiving literacy or other educational supports. However, in the adult literacy field there is an absence of critical understanding about disability as a social construct (Jackson & Schaetti, 2014; Gardner, 2010; Smythe & Courage, 2007). In this thesis I have wrestled with this incongruence, which is a persistent challenge. The dilemma is this: If I chose to primarily focus on disability I believe that to some degree, there is a risk of losing the readers that I have had in mind all along: literacy practitioners. I understand my sense of such a risk might be an example of what Davis (1995)
calls the “hegemony of normalcy” (p. 49). I understand this to mean that normative assumptions and narratives about literacy and about disability tend to define their relations in particular separated and connected ways. They are difficult to recognize in the everyday norming practices and narratives of individualism that organize people into categories of labeled problems and differences. The social construct of literacy presumes that reading and writing are things that can be learned, skills that can be gained. The idea about literacy as skills is also represented through images of valued literate abled-bodies (Davis, 2002). In the adult literacy field disability is often seen as an additional problem compounding the literacy problem. The risk I am consciously trying to pay attention to, in my experience, is located in this underlying assumption about people’s worthiness and value.

I have learned from Disability Studies scholars to pay attention to underlying assumptions of the ‘normate’ about whose bodies count, and that those assumptions are interconnected with who is able, or not able, to read and write according to certain social standards of language usage (Collins & Ferri, 2016; Titchkosky 2008b). While I posit that the ways in which literacy and disability are socially constructed are interrelated, I am not suggesting that they should be thought of as the same. Written alpha-numerical texts (including digital) — letters of the alphabet, words, numbers, symbols — are indeed human-produced objects, concrete artifacts of literacy. These artifacts exist separate from the body even though such texts are both written by a body (doctors, teachers) and read onto a body (learners, patients) (Titchkosky, 2008b). Written text for the most part is viewed as un-fleshed, whereas disability is conventionally treated as always about the body. Erevelles (2000) writes about P. McLaren’s notion of disability as a process of “enfleshment” which is “how bodies are inscribed by the dominant cultural practices
of schools. To be ‘enfleshed’ is to be marked by discourses that not only sit on the surface of the flesh but are, on the other hand, embedded in the flesh” (p. 33). Erevelles continues, “students learn the importance of disciplining their bodies so as not to distract from the “mental efforts” of the mind” (p. 33). In the policy prioritized functionalist model the normalizing view of literacy is that it is autonomous technical skills that are learned from the outside in. Adults entering literacy programs are most likely “enfleshed” with internalized feelings of inferiority and shame about failing to acquire those literacy skills when they first were, or should have been, in school. Disability Studies thinking helps me to pull down the abstracted language and discourse of literacy measurement to not just see it upon the body, but to see and sense its impact in the interiority of the body. Moreover, as a field of inquiry, Disability Studies provokes alternative ways of making meaning about bodies – people – difference and relations. With this thinking in mind I consider how learners feel about themselves as a learner and in their bodies, and how they feel about their relations with others and with text. I discuss the concept of learners’ embodied knowledge as valuable and as a critical source for learning in basic literacy education in Chapter 5.

I am drawing on concepts in Disability Studies to bring to the surface how people, specifically literacy learners feel in their bodies about themselves and their relationship with others, and how their ‘uneasy’ relationship with text has been historically and is currently intertwined with norming discourses on disability (Titchkosky, 2003). Also, there are a lot of learners in adult literacy education who are understood as disabled and/or produced as such because they are receiving literacy or other educational supports. Finally, there is a need for more research on critical examination of disability as a social construct in the adult literacy field.
2.4 Narrative Inquiry

I did not begin my research intending to use Narrative Inquiry. I began with what I called an emergent research design based on a social constructivist methodological paradigm where the “goal of the research is to rely as much as possible on the varied and multiple participant’s views on the situation being studied” (Creswell, 2009, p.8). I also clearly began with my personal point of entry, drawing explicitly on my own years of experience as a literacy practitioner and my own history of troubles as a school-aged learner. Then, in the midst of the writing process I came to understand that the ways in which I was doing my research was a narrative-like process. I was listening to the research participants talk about their experiences about their lives. I was reflecting on my own professional and lived experiences and writing them into the thesis in a story kind of way. The conversations with my thesis supervisor were like a story-telling method for me to analyze what I was learning in the process of doing this research. As I critically read policy and institutional texts, I began to recognize persuasive narratives of deficit that I had experienced as a practitioner throughout the years I have worked in the adult literacy field. I realized that I was using narrative ways of thinking and so I looked for theoretical work on narrative that resonated with my research practices that were grounded in stories of experience.

When I began to look at the literature on using narrative approaches I quickly realized that, “the idea of narrative has penetrated almost every discipline and profession” (Riessman & Quinney, 2005, p. 392). Initially it was challenging to find literature on narrative that related to how I was doing my research. Riessman and Quinney (2005) and Fraser (2004) suggested narrative approaches for research that value social justice and anti-oppression in social work and feminist studies. Academics
in adult education have contributed to narrative approaches for learning; Clark (2010) states, “we make sense of experience by narrating it” (p. 3). Rossiter and Clark (2007) argue that narrative thinking offers powerful and transformational ways to learn, which is well known by many practitioners, including myself, in adult literacy education. It could be said that narrative is “at the heart of [adult] literacy work” (Darville, 1992, p. 11). With this in mind, I continued to look to the literature on narrative.

Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) work on Narrative Inquiry in education has been most relevant to my research as their descriptions and narrative ways of writing showed me how the intuitive approach I was using could be understood and deepened by exploring it through a narrative lens. They refer to Narrative Inquiry as “a relational inquiry” (p. 60), in which people make meaning of and in experiences with each other. The key concepts of Narrative Inquiry as relational and as about, and in, experience resonated with my understanding of the Disability Studies concept that disability always “appears in the midst of other people” (Titchkosky, 2008b, p. 37) and the New Literacy Studies concept of literacy as social practice, which I argue is always in relation with others. Drawing on Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) point that “narrative is both the phenomenon and the method of social sciences” (p. 60), I understand this thesis is about stories of experiences of learners and their lives, but at the same time both my past lived experiences and my current experience of writing/narrating the thesis are also intimately part of the inquiry process.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) show how Narrative Inquiry is “stories lived and told” (p. 20), and how “people are looked at as embodiments of [their] lived stories” (p. 43). Their work was
influenced by the theories of education scholar John Dewey on experience, particularly interactional, continuity and situation. They extrapolate on the relation of these and describe them as a 3-dimensional inquiry space (p. 50). This involves personal and social relations (interactional), temporality of past, present and future (continuity), and notions of place and milieu (situation). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and others whose research builds on their concept of Narrative Inquiry say that this way of doing research involves being along side, up close, moving back and forward, inward and outward and in the midst of multiplicities of stories, memories, ways of knowing and making meaning (Clandinin et al, 2010; Clandinin & Raymond, 2006; Lessard, Caine & Clandinin, 2015; Xu & Connelly, 2010).

I have drawn on Narrative Inquiry to explore the steps I have taken to conduct this research, which means that I have tried to show the interplay of relationship, power and language in narrative descriptions and stories about experience. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest different ways of thinking about reviewing the literature, data collection and analysis and writing. They suggest that the researcher needs to have a sense of ‘being in the midst’ of the field of inquiry, and being aware of being part of place and time and relation, and seeing data as field texts and the analysis process as creating research texts, all in narrative processes and form. This was new thinking for me and I have become increasingly interested in building my academic practice in Narrative Inquiry. Although in this thesis I am using conventional terms such as data collection and analysis to describe much of my fieldwork as I originally understood it, I have already put into practice an approach to reviewing the literature that is similar to Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) approach in Narrative Inquiry. I have threaded the literature throughout the thesis and sewn it into narratives in different sections and chapters rather than following the
conventional approach of having a distinct literature review chapter. Along with scholarly literature I have also included what I have called professional literature in the adult literacy field. Some of the professional literature is government and institutional texts that are positioned as both research and evidence (for example, the OECD international literacy assessment reports and government policy documents). Some of the professional literature is public awareness material and professional development material produced by literacy organizations and governments. Another type of professional literature is practitioner-led research that was widely viewed in the field as having authority and expertise but has been discounted in the policy discourse. I describe my relationship with this literature from my experiences as a practitioner in the field and I refer to it along with the scholarly literature to analyze the data. The professional and policy documents are described in the following section on data collection, as well as further discussed in Chapters 3, 4 and 5.

In Chapter 3 I have used Narrative Inquiry to examine underlying historical tensions about competing meanings and interpretations of literacy and learning. I have drawn on my own experiences as a literacy practitioner as a way to anchor my looking backward and forward and inward and outward to explore socially and politically constructed notions of literacy in relation with people’s experiences, primarily experiences in education and learning as expressed by learners in basic literacy programs. This involves reflecting on my memories of experiences as an educator and a practitioner-researcher in relation with learners in different milieu and at different times in my history. It also involves reflecting on the current methods I have used as researcher in relation with the learners who participated in the focus groups for this thesis. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state that Narrative Inquiry requires paying close attention to the
“ambiguity, complexity, difficulty and uncertainties with the doing of the inquiry” (p. 55). They suggest that Narrative Inquiry requires the researcher to begin with an autobiographical orientation to what they call “the research puzzle” (p. 41) [italics in the original]. This helped me to understand and honour my own instinct to include my own reflective narrative of my personal life as described in Chapter 1.

As my thesis journey has unfolded I have increasingly seen the importance of using my own stories in relation with those of learners and of using Narrative Inquiry as an approach to create this research text. I have come to understand that my way of creating narrative is enacting my embodied understanding of Freire’s (2011) powerful concept of *praxis*, “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p. 51). My Narrative Inquiry is an embodied generative process of writing and talking and listening, feeling and sensing, and reading and re-writing, and writing more. The dynamic process of being in story while making it has allowed me to pay close attention, in time and in place, to language, relations, and power. To describe how I am using Narrative Inquiry I envision at least two streams of narrating – conversations – happening at the same time in which I am fully engaged. One stream may be thought of as the fieldwork, which involves my attention to experience and relations in the midst of collecting stories, analyzing stories, seeing stories in the literature and listening for stories to emerge in all of this data. The other stream may be like a self-consciousness about *who I am* as the researcher and writer in these experience(s) of both listening to the stories and seeing myself in these stories, being the storyteller of some of stories and making sense of the nuanced and the abstract while doing this research. There are multiple stories and voices, places and times, and relationships; and, there are many ways people make meaning about power and language. My ‘narrative
thinking’ method encompasses all of these and what follows are brief story-type descriptions of the narrative multiplicities that this thesis explores.

The narratives that I have long been interested in are those of learners in basic literacy programs: their stories about how they read and write, how they use written texts, and how they learn. I am particularly interested in how narratives can be used to counter the normative discourse on adult literacy. According to Sandlin and Clark (2009) learner-led constructions of narrative exist within the locality of programs, but are susceptible to persuasion of what they describe as “master political narratives” (p. 999). They studied what practitioners wrote about learners’ success in adult literacy and basic education programs in the State of Pennsylvania between 1978 and 2005. Sandlin and Clark (2009) wanted to “illustrate the impact that political master narratives have on the production of local narratives in the context of adult literacy education and the consequences of that impact.” (p. 1003). They found that learner “Success Stories” written by practitioners were primarily for the purpose of securing funding and increasingly reflected the language of the dominant discourse. Over time these stories learners were increasingly characterized as overcoming their own personally-imposed burden of low literacy by pulling up their individual literacy “bootstraps” (p. 1026). Sandlin and Clark (2009) argue that these narratives share a discourse of meritocracy at the expense of local narratives that reflect more complex and nuanced stories of learners. Those socially constructed master narratives make up the discourse of deficit inherent in the OECD literacy assessment projects’ measurement regime. In other words, I would argue that, in the broader discourse on the problem of adult literacy the political master narratives erase learners as authors of their own stories and narratives and obscure the social context in which their stories are embedded.
These moments of erasure are recovered and transformed in the classroom through narrative, when learners begin to express their own voice through speaking and writing (Davis, 2006). In their own voice learners speak back to those dominant stories that continue to produce and reinforce feelings of shame and humiliation. At the same time learners also write their resistance to social and institutional forms of oppression. Learners’ writing their visceral knowledge is the textual narrative that practitioners can find again. This is the most important pedagogical resource in adult literacy education and, as I argue throughout this thesis, it has been erased in the measurement regime of the OECD assessment projects. Learners’ counter-narratives are what actually count, not only for learning to happen but also for teaching to support learners’ own intentions and aspirations. I discuss the learners’ embodied knowledge and the learner–educator relationship in Chapter 5.

As a teacher and researcher who is fluent in reading and writing, it is my responsibility to disrupt my own assumptions about the meaning of texts in our everyday lives. I cannot presume to understand the maneuvering that learners have mastered in order to manage the multitude of reading and writing expectations in increasingly “textually mediated social worlds” (Barton, 2001, p. 92). Listening closely to the embodied knowledge of learner’s personal histories, current lives and future hopes can shift my own thinking as well as dominant ideas about what constitutes necessary material for learning in basic literacy education. Paying close attention can include all that is involved in the process of teaching and learning, such as personal philosophies about learning and teaching, how to select and use learning resources and teaching practices, and the nature of relationships between learner and teacher (Loschnig, 2014). Scholars and
practitioners alike argue that it is the learner voice that is the most necessary material and most significant narrative for learning. Ironically however, what learners know has been eclipsed by the discursive spotlight on them in the making of the “tale of crisis” of adult literacy (Walker & Rubenson, 2014, p. 157). Along with heightened media coverage from the mid 1980’s to 2013 the attention of adult literacy organizations, advocates and practitioners became increasingly redirected to focus on the dire consequences of insufficient literacy of individuals and collective groups (Sandlin & Clark, 2009; Walker & Rubenson, 2014). Although many practitioners sensed that narratives characterizing learners as heroic victims was quite contrary to how they knew learners in programs, they continued to retell these stories in practitioner training, funding proposals, program promotion and public awareness campaigns (Belzer & Pickard, 2015). What got lost in these tales of crisis was seeing the value of learners’ narratives in the practice and discourse of basic literacy education. I further explore all of these developments in Chapters 3 and 4.

2.5 Research questions, data collection and analysis

This section describes the evolution of my research questions, the sources and processes of data collection and ends with an overview of how my approach to analysis evolved as I went along. I had three data sources: a) a selection of professional and policy documents on adult literacy that were in use by policy-makers, literacy think tanks and consultants, administrators, advocates and practitioners at the time of my field work; b) my own archive of reflective journals as a practitioner over sixteen years of working in the field, and c) transcripts from focus groups I held with thirteen learners in basic literacy and education programs at a community college where I worked in Calgary, Alberta.
2.5.1 Research questions

I want to explain how my thinking evolved about my research questions. I list below the three questions that were in my research proposal. But as my data collection unfolded and I found myself "in the thick off analysis and writing" I began to understand these questions differently. My original questions were:

- What are the current constructs used to measure improvement in official institutional discourses of adult literacy?
- How do socially-barriered learners in non-credit adult literacy programs experience the literacy learning process?
- What happens when this personal knowledge is translated into institutional accountability and policy discourses?

As I went along, more fundamental questions underlying the notion of measurement of improvement began to emerge. I realized that I could not examine either the tools of measurement or the meaning of improvement without first investigating the contested views about assessment. Once I began to explore the underlying assumptions about what assessment is and what assessment is seen to do, I discovered how such assumptions construct representations of much more than 'reading troubles' or 'improvement.' They invent a whole public image of low literate bodies.

I came to see that my first research question had shifted to more of an exploration of dominant discursive constructs of assessment and of the 'problem' of adult literacy as represented by the IALS measurement of not just of literacy as an abstract notion, but of bodies, and of low literate bodies in particular. How I read the second question also changed, partly due to the emergence of
assessment in the data, but also from my research focus groups with participants who were learners in basic literacy programs; it became clear that emotional knowing was very significant in their learning experiences. This led me to a further exploration of embodied emotion and knowing in the learning process, which I discuss in detail in Chapter 5. The third question also evolved away from a focus on accountability, which is a whole thesis topic by itself, and into a deeper investigation of discourses of deficit in policy and in the OECD assessment projects. I began to focus more on how the notion of deficit was reinforced and expanded, even animated, by discursive representations of deficit figures. All of these issues are discussed in Chapter 4.

2.5.2 Professional and Policy Documents

The publications on adult literacy that I selected for this thesis are ones that I was familiar with in my role as a literacy practitioner. These documents were widely in use and highly influential among many people in the adult literacy field, specifically practitioners, program coordinators and organization administrators, policy-makers and “policy entrepreneurs” (Pinsent-Johnson, 2014, p. 1). I reviewed twenty publications produced between 1991 and 2013 (Appendix A). These include fifteen reports and policy documents by government and the OECD, two reports by government sponsored think tank and research organizations, and three public information documents by national and provincial literacy organizations. The majority of the fifteen OECD and government documents were Statistics Canada and OECD reports on the international adult literacy assessments (IALS, ALL, PIAAC). All of the other documents drew heavily on these reports.
2.5.3 Reflection journals

My reflection journals included field notes and reflective writing from this thesis research journey as well as my archive of other writing from working in the adult literacy field during the past sixteen years. The field notes are handwritten journal entries that include planning notes for data collection and reflections during focus group participant recruitment. They also include notes I took in preparation for, and after, each focus group. I also used journals while I was selecting the adult literacy publications, as well as looking at the other literature that included practitioner research-in-practice project reports and documents, some of which I authored or co-authored as a member of the research and development team. I also used journaling as I read the academic literature, both theoretical and methodological, to sort out how to write myself into the thesis; this has been a continuous practice throughout my research journey.

2.5.4 Focus groups

The recruitment for my research participants occurred between September 13 and October 26, 2013. Following common principles of qualitative methodology, I used strategies from snowball sampling and maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2015; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). I invited learners enrolled in adult literacy and basic education programs at the community college I worked at (Appendix B). I asked instructors in these programs if I could make a 2-minute announcement (Appendix C) to learners in their class and to display an invitation poster that included my contact information (Appendix D). Learners contacted me and I arranged for an individual meeting to describe the research and focus group participation as well as explain the consent form (Appendix E). Thirteen learners chose to participate, and each participant chose to
participate in one of three focus groups based on the time and location that was most convenient for them. To honour their request for confidentiality, the participants’ names are withheld.

There were three focus groups: Group A had four participants and met three times for 40 minutes each time. Group B had four participants and met twice for 60 minutes each time. Group C had five participants and met once for 2 hours. All focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed. In total there were eight women and five men and their age ranged from early twenties to mid fifties. Eight participants stated they were Aboriginal or Métis, five said they had a disability (physical, learning, developmental). Two participants said they had immigrated to Canada.

The location for all three focus groups was selected by considering what was most convenient and comfortable for the participants. As most of the participants in focus groups A and B were in the Aboriginal basic education and upgrading program at the college, I arranged with the instructors and program coordinator to meet in a small classroom separated from the larger classroom by a glass wall. The small classroom room was called the quiet room and was used by students to write tests or as a separate space to work. The small room had individual desks and chairs that I arranged into a circle formation for every focus group. I put a desk in the middle with my computer on it, which had the audio recorder. Focus groups A and B met at lunchtime when the larger classroom was closed for lunch; this allowed for more privacy. I provided a light meal and we spent the first ten minutes of the focus group having lunch and informal conversations.
Focus group C was held during class time, and located in the classroom used for the part-time evening literacy program. The classroom was large and had windows at one end. Learners’ work was displayed on the walls and there were about twenty desks in the room, some arranged together like a table and some in a row. Learners in this program could choose to sit together or on their own. I had arranged with the instructor to be able to have the focus group during class time. Prior to the focus group the instructor had discussed this with the learners and they agreed to allow the focus group to occur during class time. This class has group activities regularly and some learners choose at times to work separately from the group activity so this arrangement was not disruptive. I had also previously taught this class and knew some of the students as well as the instructor. As a group we sat at one end of the classroom, by the windows. I rearranged desks into a circle and placed my computer on a desk in the centre of the circle to record the discussion. There were a few other learners in the class who worked with the instructor at the other end of the classroom. I brought snacks and we had tea, and we had a break and shared the snacks with the other learners. After each focus group I made notes to supplement the audio recordings. The audio recordings for each of the three focus groups were transcribed.

At the beginning of the first meeting for all three groups I initiated a conversation about confidentiality and respectful listening. I shared my list of questions for discussion and explained that I wanted the conversations to be open and flexible, with the questions gently guiding the flow. There were approximately ten open-ended questions (Appendix F). The initial questions aimed to create comfort and build trust; for example we talked about people’s previous experiences of participating in research studies. I then asked questions about why participants decided to join the college program they were enrolled in, what had been helpful for their
learning, how they know they are improving, and how they describe literacy, learning, and improvement.

Then as a group we read and discussed a few excerpts from professional and policy documents. The first texts I included were three formal definitions of literacy from United Nations’ Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (Appendix G). The definitions were from different time periods, starting in the 1950s, and showed the ways that literacy had been described over time. I had chosen these definitions to open up conversations about historical issues of literacy and education. In each focus group we talked about the learners’ experiences of access to education, the residential school system and human rights. I encouraged the conversations to explore how people felt about the point of view of literacy as two-dimensional, literate or illiterate. In these conversations learners talked about their experiences of race, class, disability and gender issues in education.

The other excerpts I chose were quotes from the following three sources: the 2006 conference proceedings report by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada; the OECD 2013 Programme for Assessment of Adult Competencies, (PIAAC) Survey of Adult Skills first report; and, a factsheet on literacy and health from the Movement Canadian Literacy, a national organization (Appendix H). The conversations about these excerpts were guided by the following questions: What do you think this is saying? Do you agree or disagree with some or all of what it is saying? As these reports are about adults who are in programs like those here at the College how do you see yourself in relation to what this is saying about people?
The final question was, How do you see yourself as a learner? For this question I asked the participants if they would be willing to write their response. They agreed. I suggested they could begin their answer with: I feel, I see, I think, I am, and reassured them that any other way they chose to answer was also fine. I also offered to scribe for any of the participants. Before they began to write, I told the participants that we would chat a little longer after they finished writing and that anyone who wanted to could read out loud what they wrote. After the participants finished writing some did choose to read aloud. At the end of the focus group for group C, and at the end of the last focus group for A and B, I thanked all of the participants for their time and contributions. I invited them to contact me if they wanted to connect with me in the future.

2.5.5 Analysis

As described earlier in this chapter, for my analysis of all the data outlined here I drew upon concepts from two theoretical orientations: New Literacy Studies and Disability Studies. Methodologically, my process was iterative and emergent, drawing initially from basic qualitative research methods, and then increasingly from Narrative Inquiry, as I explain in more detail below.

My early stages of analysis with all three sources of data took a number of forms from conventional approaches to qualitative inquiry, including creating tables for organizing data pieces and chunks emerging from the focus groups; then making more tables for organizing my experience in relation to the broader discourse; and then creating poster board sheets for mapping pieces and chunks and considering themes and patterns.
I began analyzing texts prior to conducting the focus groups. My initial approach to analysis was by paying attention to language usage and the ways in which the notion of low literacy was represented in bodily form, that is, in how people and their lives were portrayed. I looked for words that reproduced deficit thinking, such as: low literate population, low-literacy, low/poor skills, low-skilled, deficiency, deficit, characteristics, Level One, Level Two, below Level Three, at-risk. I also looked at language usage in relation to race and disability, and at how social outcomes were presented as an outcome of low literacy. After the focus groups I continued to carefully read through these texts but now with the participants’ personal stories in mind.

The analysis of the focus group data really began as I listened closely to the participants while in the process of conducting the focus groups. I paid very close attention as they shared stories about their experiences with texts within and beyond the literacy program they were in. I paid close attention to the emotional expression in their telling and talking with each other. I listened carefully to hear the nuanced social relations and conditions in the stories about their relationship and experiences with reading and writing. I gave close attention to their individual and collective voices about how they make meaning of learning. I was listening for their use of language about literacy and learning, how they talked about their own relationships with others and with text.

As I went along I increasingly reflected on how I was paying attention to what was written in those professional and policy texts, to what learners said about what they know and feel, and to what both of these sources told me about taken-for-granted norming practices in the ‘making’ of adult literacy. I did this quite organically, following my own instincts by listening and talking,
feeling and sensing, and reading and re-writing, and writing some more. With hindsight, I can see how this experience of intense listening began to transform my understanding of the meaning and the potential of research methods.

To help me reflect on my own experience as a practitioner, and in combination with how I was analyzing those selected texts and the focus group data, I began to engage in a practice of recording my conversations with my thesis supervisor, which I transcribed and then ‘wrote further’. This process contributed to drafting written pieces that eventually led to further drafts of the thesis sections. In these analysis conversations three things were happening. One, I was critically reflecting on my own personal narrative, my experiences as an adult literacy practitioner. Two, I was talking through my ways of analyzing the data and what I was seeing in the individual and collective personal narratives of the focus group participants. Three, I was analyzing this ‘narrative’ data within (in relation to) the context of the dominant discourse on adult literacy in Canada. This means I was examining the connections of personal stories to a number of significant written texts (government and institutional reports, research and policy documents, public information materials) that were part of my experience as a literacy practitioner, including those that had been reviewed by the focus group participants.

As I went along it became clear that these recorded conversations with my supervisor were also an important part of an emergent analysis process, this time drawing on talk as well as writing.

Through this emergent analysis process, I gained insight that my research is about people’s stories, including my own, and that I was using narrative ways of thinking. It became clear to me that I was already thinking in narrative ways and so I turned to literature on Narrative Inquiry,
and immediately found that it resonated with my research practices. I increasingly recognized that even the changing policy discourse was a form of official story-making about literacy. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe this as a process of finding a narrative form and that with time and a “certain tolerance for the unease” (p. 154) the researcher is able to see and sew the narratives in data (field text) together in the creation of the (narrative) research text. So gradually my methodology took a more explicitly narrative turn, as I explored in more detail earlier in this chapter.

In the next chapter, I have used narrative ways of thinking to trace the expansion and retraction of adult literacy education in Canada as a way to examine the underlying tensions about the competing meanings and interpretations of literacy and learning.
Chapter 3

Re-making Adult Literacy

3.1 Introduction

Chapter 3 traces the expansion and retraction of adult literacy education in Canada from the 1980s to 2016, and offers a commentary on these developments from the vantage point of my experience in the field of practice. It draws on Canadian and international scholarly literature, as well as both documents from the archive of professional literature I collected and the reflective journals I wrote during my own thirteen years of practice in Alberta. I begin with examining the build-up of the field including the establishment of the federal government’s National Literacy Secretariat and the beginning of large-scale standardized literacy surveys. I examine the period of expansion of practitioner driven research and capacity-building bolstered by the social practice theories of the New Literacy Studies. Concurrently, I investigate the Canadian government’s role in the production of the OECD IALS framework and the Government of Canada’s Essential Skills Framework; and, reflecting on my experiences I examine the production of a measurement regime. The final section considers the retraction of adult literacy education, particularly the curtailing of basic literacy programs. This account lays the groundwork for my analysis in Chapter 4 of the norming practices of this measurement regime producing literacy deficit discourse and learners as deficit characters.

3.2 Before the IALS

This chapter begins with looking back to consider the adult literacy education field before the OECD assessment projects became a dominating presence (Lerner, 1997). The bookAdult
*Literacy Work in Canada* written by Canadian literacy scholar Richard Darville in 1992 provides a critical account of the adult literacy landscape four years prior to the release of the Statistics Canada report of the OECD-led IALS survey. Darville’s (1992) book offers a historical glimpse into the discursive tensions in a time of heightened government and media attention on adult literacy in Canada. He describes a range of intensifying events in government, media and adult literacy education programs and organizations during the 1980’s, noting that 1986 to 1988 were “crucial years for putting literacy on the [national] agenda” (Darville, 1992, p. 20).

Looking back to the time before the IALS arrived illuminates certain discursive moments that shed some light onto how the IALS became a dominating force in the language of adult literacy policy, advocacy, and practice. I met Richard Darville and other academics and practitioners at a professional development and research institute in 2003. It was a five-day institute for literacy practitioners and researchers to come together to build research capacity among literacy practitioners (Atkinson, 2003). This conference was a significant event in the growing Research in Practice movement in Canada, and it was a turning point for me. I felt I was in the company of other people doing adult literacy work that had similar values about learning and human dignity. However, it wasn’t until 2012 that I discovered *Adult Literacy Work in Canada* (Darville, 1992), and by that time I was reading this historical account through the lens of my own experience of more than a decade of working in adult literacy. I read it with the advantage of having read other work by Darville such as his scholarly critiques of the OECD “literacy regime” (1999, p. 274) and its reductionist influence on policies on adult literacy (2011), as well as his Freirian-informed approaches to teaching and learning in adult literacy (Darville 1989, 2009). All of this
helped me to hear his voice as I read *Adult Literacy Work in Canada*, and to wonder about the time and places literacy work was occurring in the 1980’s and early 1990s.

At the start of the 1980’s advocacy and capacity-building among adult literacy practitioners and supporters was well underway (Thomas, 2001). It had begun after the first national conference on literacy and advocacy efforts expanded with the establishment of the Movement for Canadian Literacy in 1977. At the same time research was being carried out on ‘adult illiteracy’ (Thomas, 1983) and on the connection between education levels and labour. Thomas’ 1983 UNESCO occasional paper, *Adult Illiteracy in Canada – A Challenge*, was viewed as “the most comprehensive national assessment yet produced in Canada” (Shohet, 2001, p. 230). Here is how Shohet describes its influence: “The juxtaposition of data on labour force participation, educational attainment and training activities was effective in making connections between the social justice and economic motives of literacy advocates” (Shohet, 2001, p.231).

The relationship between literacy, social justice and economic opportunity were presented as natural connections in the argument for bringing about ‘good’ outcomes for all these areas. This argument of literacy as ‘good’ continues to be a discursive staple to this day. The presumption is that, of course improving literacy is an equitable and social inclusion issue, and of course improving literacy opens up economic opportunities for individuals and hopefully their community. This is the argument I learned when I began working in adult literacy. Linking together a labour market notion of literacy with perspectives of literacy as a social justice issue was viewed as advancing the cause for literacy. There was a sense that the adult literacy education field was gaining capacity. At least that is what many practitioners presumed was
happening. The trickiness with such a narrative that so strongly emerged during the 1980s, and especially the 1990s, is how it silences critical voices questioning what all this is doing, what literacy is being made to be, and what it means for learners.

Walker and Rubenson (2014) describe the 1987 Southam newspaper survey on ‘adult illiteracy’ as a “principal catalyst of an adult literacy agenda in Canada” (p. 149). The Southam survey was extensively covered in the media along with the federal government’s new commitment of funds for adult literacy and the establishment of the National Literacy Secretariat in 1988. The National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) was seen to be the “most commanding agency in literacy in Canada…its mandate allowed it to raise public awareness, develop learning materials, carry out research, improve student access and outreach, and improve coordination and information sharing among practitioners” (Shohet, 2001, p. 205). Over time the NLS funded hundreds of projects across the literacy education spectrum, from workforce basic skills to community development and family literacy and had “an international reputation for bringing research and practice together” (St. Clair, 2007, p. 63). The NLS supported a movement for practice-informed research known as “research-in-practice” (Horsman & Norton, 1999; Horsman & Woodrow, 2006; Norton, 2008; St. Clair, 2007). It was also committed to more traditional scientific research.

One of the first large-scale projects of the NLS was funding the 1989 “Literacy Skills Used in Daily Activities” (LSUDA) national survey by Statistics Canada. The LSUDA was conducted with participants selected from the Canadian Labour Force Survey by Statistics Canada. The LSUDA along with the Southam News Survey were both significant in that they brought about a
new language of measuring adult literacy, switching from school grades to levels of literacy skills. The IALS experts would later claim that ‘direct measuring’ through surveys rather than grade-level proxy measures was a breakthrough in adult literacy assessment (Statistics Canada, 1996). A long-standing challenge in adult literacy had been the reliance of the adult literacy field on research and resources based upon studies in children’s literacy and language development, so any studies that presented an ‘all grown up’ reference was accepted by most practitioners as progressive. Another significant discursive move that the LSUDA made was that it “was the first official document not to use the word illiteracy” (Longfield, 2003, p. 90). ‘Illiteracy’ was, and continues to be, seen as shameful, and to be met with prejudice. Although there was a strong desire to move away from using this word, it continues to be used by media and is a more familiar concept than ‘adult literacy’ (Walker & Rubenson, 2014). Even though there has been a language shift from ‘the problem of adult illiteracy’ to ‘the problem of adult literacy’ the underlying presumptions of shame and attitudes of prejudice remain substantially in place.

The NLS was originally set up with five years of funding to address “the literacy issue” (Darville, 1992, p. 7). Not surprisingly there were, and still are, varying and divergent ideological perspectives about the meaning of the ‘literacy issue.’ Most practitioners working in community-based programs, as well as some working in community colleges and school board programs, viewed literacy as a human rights issue. Some viewed adult literacy education as a community development endeavour. A number of practitioners, advocates and allied scholars and researchers perceived the human rights perspective of literacy as political and emancipatory and they incorporated Freire’s liberatory education philosophy into their work. Other practitioners and organizations worked from a charitable and paternalistic perspective using what
Quigley (1997) refers to as “humanist maternalism” (p. 122) that perceives learners as childlike. For the federal and provincial governments in Canada, like other industrial nations, the literacy issue was increasingly viewed as the dire “economics of illiteracy” (Darville, 1992, p 20). The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (1988) produced a report, *Adult Illiteracy in Canada: Identifying and addressing the problem*, which stated that ‘functional illiterates’ had more potential for learning labour skills than those that “may be considered illiterate in the traditional sense” (p. 5).

By the mid 1980s the terms functional literacy and functionally literate were commonly used by international organizations such as UNESCO and the OECD as well as many others. The Southam news surveys defined functional literacy as “the ability to use printed and written information to function in society.” (Calamai, 1987, p. 7). Although the notion of ‘functional’ came under criticism about simplifying literacy as technical skills (Street, 1984) for institutional and corporate interests (Darville, 1992, 1999) there seemed to be little concern at the program level about the rise in thinking in functional terms of people as human capital (Hamilton & Barton, 2000) during the momentum years of getting literacy on the agenda. Darville (1992) argued that the “literacy community is willy nilly entered into a larger…dominant policy discussion…[of]…economic goals” (p. 84-85) and as such “[a]dvocacy organizations and practitioners will need conscious strategies to engage in this discussion” (p 84) in order to keep “social and educational rights in the framework of political and economic agreements” (p. 85).

Indeed, there was tremendous effort to broaden and deepen the discussion about what to do about the ‘illiteracy problem’ and how to strengthen adult literacy and basic education (Thomas, 2001).
There was an interest in bringing the divergent “camps” (Darville, 1992, p.16) together for the purpose of strengthening advocacy efforts. In 1983 the Movement for Canadian Literacy hosted a national meeting with the intention of improving relations between those who viewed literacy as a social justice issue, and those who saw literacy through a charitable lens that emphasized technical skills development. Both camps referred to UNESCO’s descriptions and definition of literacy that included functionalist and political perspectives. UNESCO was viewed as the international leading organization for education and literacy (Wagner, 2011). In its 1946 declaration of human rights, it proclaimed literacy as a human right, however it’s definitions of literacy did not reflect this. In 1951 it defined a literate person as someone “who can with understanding both read and write a short simple statement on his/her everyday life” (Liu, 1958). Then in 1962 the UNESCO definition was expanded to reflect a broader representation of ‘literate functioning’: “A person is functionally literate who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his group and community and also for enabling him to continue to use reading, writing and calculating for his own and the community’s development” (Darville, 1992, p. 10). In many OECD member (industrialized) countries this definition continued to be referred to in adult literacy education until it was replaced by the OECD’s definition in the mid 1990’s.

The UNESCO definition was not viewed as explicitly functionalist partly because it declared literacy to be a human right and partly because of related events. One significant event was the international symposium in Persepolis, Iran in 1975. This symposium produced the Declaration of Persepolis, which was viewed as a “turning point in literacy” (Schugurensky, 2011, p. 114). The reason to take time to describe this ‘turning point’ is because the philosophical standpoint of
literacy as a social justice issue was held by a number of Canadian literacy practitioners and scholars who were active and influential in the advocacy work that began in the 1970s. From then on, the notion of adult literacy education as liberatory gained momentum among practitioners and allied scholars and influenced a wide range of program practices. At Persepolis the notion of literacy for social justice was a central theme. Paulo Freire was a key actor at the symposium where he presented a paper titled “Are literacy programs neutral?” and received the UNESCO award for literacy (Schugurensky, 2011, p. 79). His influence in the resulting Persepolis Declaration for literacy was significant. Schugurensky, (2011) points out that Freire’s use of language is reflected in a few passages in the Declaration, for example, “Literacy work, like education in general, is a political act. It is not neutral, for the act of revealing social reality in order to transform it, or of concealing it in order to preserve it, is political. Literacy is not an end in itself. It is a fundamental human right” (p. 114). For those who saw themselves doing literacy work in and with programs this declaration, along with other seminal work such as Freire’s (2011) Pedagogy of the Oppressed, informed their beliefs and resonated with their experiences in adult literacy – as an issue of social inequality. Relating the Persepolis Declaration to the 1962 UNESCO definition, it could easily be interpreted to acknowledge a social justice perspective. For instance, the UNESCO 1962 definition that states, “literacy is required for effective functioning…to continue to use reading, writing and calculating for his own and the community’s development” (Darville, 1992, p. 10) could be viewed as giving credence to collective activism and community development work. Although there were contested perspectives in the adult literacy education field about how to ‘do’ literacy work, toward the late 1980’s there was a greater sense of possibility for this work in Canada because
of the government’s significant investment and the media attention to information from the ‘new’ survey.

With the United Nations declaration of 1990 as the International Year of Literacy the adult literacy education field in Canada was rapidly expanding. Thomas (2001) describes 1990 as a “frenetic year of literacy activities” (p. xxiii). The ‘new survey information’ from Southam and LSUDA was touted among policy-makers, the media and practitioners and gave a sense that adult literacy was indeed getting onto the national agenda. The Movement for Canadian Literacy produced Organizing Adult Literacy and Basic Education in Canada: A Policy and Practice Discussion Document (1991) as part of their extensive work advocating for a “coordinated policy...that would ensure that there is equitable access to quality basic education for all adults who need or desire it” (p 5). There was a sense of hope among adult literacy practitioners that the heightened government investment in adult literacy work was an opportunity to harmonize the disparate concepts of adult literacy as either an economic resource or a human right. As Darville (1992) states, “Whether economic interests and interests in social equity remain aligned is one major question for the development of literacy work in the 1990s” (p. 21). With hindsight, I now see that that the hoped-for alignment of social justice and economic interests was rather naïve and that the government’s economic interests were increasingly out of alignment with program advocates and practitioners. Walker and Rubenson (2014) say that when Adult Literacy Work in Canada (Darville, 1992) was published, the momentum behind the increased government activity and media attention was driven primarily by a newly-influential story of the threat that (il)literacy posed to the country’s economy. As Darville (1992) notes, early in the 1990’s there was a “shift in the nature of the economic arguments….from issues of [people’s] access to the
labour markets, and unemployment and welfare costs….to [business] competitiveness…in an advanced economy” (p. 19). The majority of those in the adult literacy community did not know that the direction in which the field was heading extended beyond national borders. By the end of the International Year of Literacy, the expanding technologies of large-scale surveying projects was being taken up in an international agenda of competing national economies. With the arrival of the OECD IALS survey the new norm for ‘functional’ literacy was becoming a technological indicator of economic globalization.

The new information that the Southam and LSUDA surveys offered the adult literacy field could be described as two interwoven stories. One builds upon the old story of the social shame of ‘illiteracy’, and the other is like the first episode of a grander narrative of functionalist technologies brought to you by the Canadian Government and the OECD. The Southam News Survey produced more than twenty-nine newspaper articles on the results of their survey and related issues in adult literacy education. It offered a ‘human’ story and produced statistics that were read as proof about the shameful extent of ‘illiteracy’ and the fractured state of adult literacy education in Canada. One article described the “typical illiterate”, and other articles reported on issues such as the debate about adult literacy education as skills training versus education as political; the lack of funding for programs and research; and, “What works to combat illiteracy” (Calamai, 1987, p. 72). A central theme throughout the articles was illiteracy as an economic cost to individuals and the country at large, personal shame and embarrassment, illiteracy’s influence in poverty and crime, and the trouble with ‘functional illiterates’ not seeing that they need to improve their reading and writing. In many ways the ‘illiterate’ narrative
continues today albeit reproduced through a powerful language of the market, science and statistics technologies (Belzer & St. Clair, 2005; Hamilton, Maddox & Addey, 2015).

The second related story begins to take hold with the LSUDA survey, which was presented by Statistics Canada as scientifically superior to the Southam News Survey (Montigny, Kelly & Jones, 1991). The design of the LSUDA was based upon a theoretical model of reading and testing technology used in large-scale adult literacy surveys in the US (Mosenthal & Kirsch, 1989). The LSUDA was conducted in both official languages; this fact was later argued by the IALS experts – most of whom were involved in the LSUDA and those US surveys – as successfully demonstrating a testing design that was “independent of cultural and linguistic factors” (Statistics Canada, 1996). Compared to UNESCO-informed definitions of literacy that included reading and writing, the LSUDA claimed that it’s definition more accurately represented “literacy in terms of real life requirements” (Montigny, Kelly & Jones, 1991, p. 13). It defines literacy as “[t]he information processing skills necessary to use the printed material commonly encountered at work, at home, and in the community” (Montigny, Kelly & Jones, 1991, p. 13).

Initially, the abstruse reframing of literacy as ‘information processing skills’ was not perceived as problematic by many practitioners and advocates, nor was the rising authority of these new functionalist measurement technologies (Movement for Canadian Literacy, 1991; Darville, 1992). While noting that the LSUDA offered very useful information, Darville (1992) points out that while statistics may say something about people and literacy, they “barely begin to describe the realities of people’s lives” (p. 10). He also notes that test items and standardized tests like
those used in surveys are normed to functionalist institutional tasks and “do not, and cannot not, reflect the wisdom of learner centredness and community embeddedness in literacy work” (p. 67). While the literacy community, made up of advocates and practitioners, and learners increasingly engaged in building the capacity of the field, the Canadian government was forming new relationships with the OECD and the US organization Education Testing Services that would “change the nature of the discourse on literacy in the 1990s” (Thomas, 2001, p. xxiv).

3.3 Enter the IALS

In the late 1980’s and early 1990’s Statistics Canada sought to work closer with the US-based Education Testing Services (ETS), an influential private non-profit organization in educational testing and measurement, with the idea of constructing an international adult literacy survey (IALS). During the time of intensified momentum in the Canadian adult literacy field the ETS was conducting three US government sponsored large-scale adult literacy surveys. They were: the 1985 Young Adult Literacy Survey (YALS), followed by the Department of Labor job seeker’s study (Kirsch, et al., 1992), and the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS). The NALS was presented by the ETS as the first nation-wide adult literacy survey, and greatly influenced the development of the OECD surveys. The IALS authors noted, “Statistics Canada and Educational Testing Service (ETS) teamed up to build and deliver an international comparative study. After some discussion and debate, the framework and methodology used in NALS was applied to the first large-scale International Adult Literacy Survey” (Murray, Clermont & Binkley, 2005, p. 94). With the addition of Canada’s LSUDA survey all four surveys were credited with contributing to the design and development of the IALS (OECD & Statistics Canada, 1995). According to Statistics Canada these four surveys, particularly the
NALS “demonstrated the power of the “Kirsch-Mosenthal framework …[with] a very complex and sophisticated testing and scaling technology refined at the Educational Testing Services” (Statistics Canada, 1996, p.13). This framework was a constructed concept of reading as ‘cognitive information processing’ organized into prescribed levels of skills ‘proficiency’ and demonstrated by behavioural responses (task) to test questions using an analytical process of test validity (Item Response Theory) (Pinsent-Johnson, 2014). The IALS entered the Canadian adult literacy education field in the mid 1990s as a powerful reconstruction project and it would be more than fifteen years before it would be distressingly obvious to many practitioners and advocates who uphold literacy as a human right, just how different and difficult the field had become for practitioners and learners. The impact of the rendering of adult literacy education to skills testing and comparative statistics is discussed later in this chapter and Chapter 4.

The IALS was initially well-received by most adult literacy practitioners in Canada, and they perceived the survey as beneficial to this under resourced area of adult education (Atkinson, 2015). Even though the IALS framework was highly criticized by scholars from Europe, the UK and Canada (Blum, Goldstein & Guerin-Pace, 2001; Darville, 1999; Druine & Wildemeersch, 2000; Hamilton & Barton, 2000; Hautecouer, 2000), the critique of its technological limitations and presumptive interpretations was overshadowed by accolades from the Canadian government itself of the IALS “liberating framework” (Statistics Canada, 1996, p. 79). The attention of the majority of practitioners and advocates was swept up in the spectacle of the IALS, which the federal government touted as producing the most extensive ‘data’ on literacy in industrialized countries (Statistics Canada, 1996, 2005). Statistics Canada representatives travelled across the country making presentations about the IALS and its results. At one presentation I attended I
remember being overwhelmed by the endless slides of statistical graphs and jargon, as the speaker said ‘The numbers don’t lie’. In the desire, or perhaps more obligation, to take up this new IALS language, the majority of literacy practitioners and advocates may have ignored their own “wisdom of literacy work” (Darville, 1992, p. 77) and intuitive sense that this new ‘body of evidence’ was not reflective of the learner bodies in classrooms. I certainly had doubts about the promising possibilities the IALS could bring to the field, but, as a new literacy practitioner I felt that perhaps I just needed to learn more about this measurement framework.

The IALS experts claimed that the framework was “a remarkable scientific advance” (Statistics Canada, 1996, p. 78) compared to other forms of literacy assessment. They argued that its strength lay in its measurement design, which uses a continuum scale rather than binary categories of literate/illiterate, and in its use of ‘real-world’ texts that adults would likely encounter in their everyday lives as ‘stimuli’ in the test items rather than school-type test content. Thus the IALS was presented as a ‘direct measure,’ one that it was more accurate than those seen to be proxy measures, such as school grades and education levels. Finally, the IALS was heralded as the first trans-national comparative survey not limited by language or cultural differences. This last argument was significant for the OECD’s investment in producing economic statistics and indicators for the purpose of growth and international trade particularly for industrialized countries. It is important to note the role of the US in the push for the IALS (Rubenson, 2008). In the 1980s the US government was increasingly concerned with its political “position on the international market” (Cussó & D’Amico as cited in Atkinson, 2013b, p. 7). Atkinson (2013b) describes the influential role the US government and the ETS had in the making of the IALS. She states, “the Department of Education pressured the Organization for
Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to undertake transnational comparisons” (Atkinson, 2013, p. 7). Hautecouer (2000) also points out the influence the US government and ETS had. He states, “American in origin, [the IALS] has indeed rapidly acquired an international political power which many similar initiatives might envy” (p. 357). Statistics Canada appointed a director of the IALS project and positioned itself as a central partner in this ‘groundbreaking study’ of “comparable literacy profiles across national, linguistic and cultural boundaries” (Statistics Canada, 1996, p. 9). Powered by the dominant discourse of “positivist scientific methodology” (Hamilton, 2001, p. 185) and “neo-liberal political tendencies” (Druine & Wildermiess, 2000, p. 394) the OECD and the US and Canadian governments aimed to position themselves as global experts in literacy and economic prosperity (Belzer & St. Clair, 2005; Darville, 1999; Grek, 2015; Pinsent-Johnson, 2014; Rubenson, 2008; St. Clair, 2012).

The new-found partnership between Statistics Canada, the US National Centre for Education Statistics, the ETS, and the OECD was in response to the globalization of the labour market and the emerging discourse on the ‘need’ for “core, generic or transferable skills to facilitate labour flexibility” (Jackson, 2005, p. 15). The Canadian government’s hefty investment from the very beginning of its long commitment to the OECD assessment enterprise increasingly meant, in Canada that basic literacy education was being moved onto thin ice. An early indication of privileging labour over the “original social development features of [the NLS] literacy policy” (Hayes, 2013, p.38) were that the federal government invested in using the IALS framework in their national ‘Essential Skills’ project (Jackson, 2005; Pinsent-Johnson, 2015). While Statistics Canada was conducting the first wave of the IALS the federal government, with the support of the NLS was developing the Essential Skills framework, a large-scale labour market initiative to
develop a measurement framework for generic, basic and core labour skills. Literacy consultant and former NLS manager, Brigid Hayes (2013) states, “The development and application of the essential skills framework signaled a growing emphasis on the economic dimension of literacy” (p. 39). Another signal of the policy shift toward literacy as basic labour skills was the 1993 move of the NLS from the department responsible for citizenship to the Department of Human Resources Development Canada.

Many practitioners in the fields did not see the incremental shifts towards a human capital construct of literacy that made up the IALS framework. This was partly due to the National Literacy Secretariat’s long standing determination “to balance the social justice motive for literacy with the economic” (Shohet, 2001, p. 207) interests of the government. The NLS existed for nearly two decades, and it wasn’t until after it was replaced by the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills in 2006 that it started to become clear that the policy direction of the federal government of the time was moving exclusively toward a labour skills framework (Smythe, 2015). This was quite unimaginable among many practitioners and advocates. They knew that adults enrolled in basic literacy programs for multiple reasons. The expressed values of the NLS acknowledged the importance of literacy in all areas of people’s lives, not just work.

Since 1990, the United Nations International Year of Literacy, the adult literacy field in Canada had built-up much capacity at the program level. In most jurisdictions adult literacy education was changing, partly due to greater involvement of learners in program decision-making, creative projects and advocacy work (Movement for Canadian Literacy, 2003). There was positive collaboration between the NLS and the diverse range of literacy programs, to create
inventive and responsive projects and research that used New Literacy Studies approaches and valued learning as a holistic experience. There was an emergence of interest in professionalizing the field through practitioner-driven research projects, educator training and certification programs. The Grass Roots Press, established in 1997, was a made-in-Canada company that produced adult literacy learning resources developed by literacy educators. Starting in 2003 a new Canadian journal was published by the collective efforts of activist practitioners and researchers. *Literacies: Researching practice, practicing research* was the first Canadian national journal on practitioner driven research from a critical pedagogical stance, with similarities to RaPAL: *Research and Practice in Adult Literacy* in the UK. Adult literacy was also “a major area of interest” (Davis & Flanagan, 2009, p. 19) in the federally-funded Canadian Council on Learning’s Adult Learning Knowledge Centre at the University of New Brunswick.

From the perspective of many practitioners the first few years of the 21st Century was a period of great capacity-building for adult literacy and it seemed like the ‘adult literacy problem’ was finally being addressed. We felt optimistic: wasn’t this what we (practitioners, advocates and government) had wanted?

During the 1990s and early 2000s, Statistics Canada and the OECD produced a number of reports on the IALS. In Canada these reports made media headlines; one example in the Globe and Mail newspaper was, “Something rotten with the state of our literacy” (Thorsell, 1996 as cited by Walker & Rubenson, 2014, p. 153). The heightened media attention brought a sense of legitimacy to what many practitioners saw as the ‘invisible’ issue of adult literacy. Finally the hidden problem was out in the open. Like other practitioners I believed that, because the IALS numbers ‘proved’ that literacy was a ‘real’ problem this influential survey was making the case
for “ongoing stable funding” (Atkinson, 2015, p. 207). When I began working in 2001 my initial impression of the adult literacy field was that it was a vibrant area of adult education with a diversity of complementary programs from tutoring and classrooms to community learning to workplace literacy. The OECD defines literacy as the “ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work, and in the community to achieve one’s goals, and develop one’s knowledge and potential” (OECD & Statistics Canada, 2000, p. x). Looking at the IALS definition of literacy I read the phrase “at home, at work and in the community” literally as having equal weight in policy and practice.

Although I had reservations about the IALS-based argument that a ‘low literate’ population would “threaten a nation’s economic strength and social cohesion” (Murray, Clermont & Binkley, 1995, p.13), I felt obliged to use the OECD definition in my work even though it seemed odd to use a definition of literacy that did not include the words ‘reading’ or ‘writing’. The IALS was credited with bringing adult literacy out of “the domain of the formal education systems” (Thomas, 2001, p. xxiv), and for replacing the term ‘illiteracy’ with seemingly more respectful levels of literacy along a continuum scale. Most significantly, the IALS experts stated that its framework offered a new “common language and a vehicle for discussing the definition of the skill area” (Murray, Clermont & Binkley, 2005 p. 92). The notion of a common language however, obscured the normalization of IALS as the prevailing discourse on adult literacy as deficit, which I further discuss in Chapter 4.

Similar to other jurisdictions in Canada, in the Alberta adult literacy field where I worked the desire to have a “common language” was a regular topic of conversation. The IALS ‘framework’
as most practitioners came to know it, with the government’s public endorsement of it, did indeed act as the vehicle from which the new ‘common’ language would take form. Along with the many other ‘literacy stakeholders’ I worked with, I welcomed the idea of ‘getting on the same page,’ but found the new ‘IALS speak’ to be somewhat disconnected from learners’ actual lives, and from how learning occurs within social contexts. In my experience the field’s desire for a common language was based on a presumption of mutuality. I understood the common language to mean shared understandings about adult literacy education as diverse and varied not as singularly universal. ‘Didn’t ‘we’ the stakeholders share complementary aims and understandings about literacy and adult literacy education? In Alberta there seemed to be presumptions about collaboration as shared power between the government and practitioners, and about our status as equal stakeholders. However, with some distance and reflection I see that the continued hope for alignment of economic interests with human rights and social justice interests was perhaps more on the part of practitioners and educators than the government.

The efforts by practitioners and activists to see similarities between their knowledge of basic literacy education and how literacy was framed in the language of the IALS framework, ultimately made for compromise and conformity (Pinsent-Johnson, 2014; Smythe, 2015). Practitioners began to use the IALS categories of ‘Level One’ or ‘Level Two’ to describe learners. These categories were the lower levels on the IALS scale; people in these levels were described as having literacy skill deficiencies and being below the “Level 3 threshold” (Greiner et al., 2008, p. 20) of proficiency. The 500-point scale in IALS, with its persuasive levels of proficiency along a continuum, was one of the most powerful pieces of the IALS framework. In my experience the scale and levels were the axis of a new way of talking about literacy, the new
common language that all stakeholders could share. The 500-point scale was arranged into 5 different levels of skills with descriptions of literacy skills and examples of what literacy skill people should be able to do at each level and almost all of the government and IALS authors’ focus was on the literacy ‘deficits’ of the two lower levels. There was further studying and surveying on the low literate population that reinforced narratives about the negative outcomes of literacy deficits. The making of a dominant discourse of deficit can be traced back to Canadian policy entrepreneurs and “privileged experts” (Pinsent-Johnson, 2015, p. 189) who held key positions in the OECD assessment projects and were contract consultants to the government as well as employees in Statistics Canada and HRSDC. Pinsent-Johnson (2014) described their influence as “overhaul[ing] Canada’s approach to developing adult literacy education” (p. 203). This thesis argues that central to that accomplishment was the construction of a particular Canadian version of the measurement regime, and, as Bartlett (2008) states, “the construction of literacy measures is an utterly political process” (p. 741).

The authors of IALS presented the range of levels across a continuum as less judgmental than the illiterate-literate dichotomy. However, Smythe (2015) points out that these “categorization are frequently and inappropriately re-contextualized to attempt to describe actual people and literacy uses” (p. 9) [italics in the original]. Despite criticism that the IALS levels were “arbitrarily fixed...[and]…statistically invented” (Hamilton & Barton, 2000, p. 384), the levels were presented as offering realistic descriptions of a range of literacy skills that people used in daily life (Greiner et al., 2008). In the 1996 Statistics Canada report, for example, the IALS authors argued that, “This understanding of literacy recognizes that everyone has some level of literacy skill and proficiency” (Statistics Canada, 1996, p.15). What was not initially apparent to me and
other literacy practitioners was that common language based on the constructed notion of a continuum was centered on what people could not do. The old literate-illiterate binary was actually being replaced with a new threshold: ‘Level 3’ on the IALS scale, which was “considered a suitable minimum for coping with the demands of everyday life and work in a complex, advanced economy” (OCED & Statistics Canada, 2000, p. xi). The constructed notion of a common language was more of a re-interpretation of the illiterate body in new technological language that is based on the importance of instruments such as the IALS scale and test (Gorur, 2015). Through the assessment instrument and the inevitable language of its working and purpose, Druine & Wildemeersch (2000) argue that the authors of IALS were also “construct[ing] reality” (p. 402).

Another aspect of the stakeholder conversations about a shared desired for a common language was the notion of ‘literacy in daily life’. The IALS authors argued that the survey test used ‘real-life’ examples of literacy skills that people would use in daily life. The IALS definition literacy included “daily activities….at home, at work and in the community” and this wording could be viewed as similar to New Literacy Studies concept of literacy as social practices in daily life. The New Literacy Studies approach stands in sharp contrast to the fundamental IALS concept of literacy as decontextualized skills. Pinsent-Johnson (2014) points out that the IALS authors “co-opt terms and ideas from social practice and sociocultural perspectives to support their conceptualization and definition of literacy” (p.32). Underneath all the talk of a new understanding of literacy in the social environment of daily life were opposing philosophical tensions about what literacy is, and more importantly how to assess its value.
The importance of a ‘common language’ was also used to argue for greater continuity across the various types of literacy programs. The government argued that common language would allow learners to seamlessly move from one program to another. Policy-makers assumed that by using the IALS levels and assessments, all learners would be categorized as Level One or Two and all the various programs would have the capacity to allow learners to continue on from where they left off in their former program. However, this type of capacity required a program design that was based on the IALS framework. It required greater uniformity of assessment, which would also require a more directive curriculum. In my experience these types of programs were designed as workforce Essential Skills, and the philosophical approach to learning was vastly different from concepts about whole-person learning that was valued in basic literacy programs. The college I worked in had developed a particular Essential Skills program, which was based on the commercialization of an IALS “spin-off test” (Pinsent-Johnson, 2014, p. 92). In my experience these types programs fully embrace norming practices and notions about literacy as primarily a workforce skill, and learners as trainable workers for the ‘knowledge economy’. Moreover, the learners eligible for these programs were those who already had enough basic reading and writing skills to be able to complete the prescribed assessments and curriculum. Although these programs were not designed for basic literacy learners, this distinction became obscured in the narrative of the need for a common language. What got missed in all the conversations and meetings to get everyone ‘on the same page’ was that a concept of universality derived from large-scale standardized testing demands conformity to a criteria that requires decontextualizing individual learners from their local cultures and social environments (Hamilton & Pitt, 2011).
3.4 From IALS to ALL to PIAAC

Statistics Canada continued to play a lead role in the second OECD survey, the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL). By the time the ALL results were published in 2005 the Canadian government had continually invested in this international assessment enterprise for more than twelve years (Grek, 2015). The federal and provincial governments’ financial contribution and involvement in PIAAC, the third survey continued to be substantial (Pinsent-Johnson, 2015) although Statistics Canada did not have the same lead partnership position. As I became more involved in basic literacy programs and research-in-practice and professional development projects, I became critically aware of the impact of the government’s embrace of the OECD surveys. While I was well aware of the growing policy concern with measuring literacy I was also gaining insight into the meaning of learning in adult literacy education. What was significant was how learners and practitioners valued learning in a full-bodied way. My increasing skepticism of the policy measurement discourse was based on what I saw in those much talked-about surveys, that there was a lack of recognition of learning from the standpoint of the learner. Eventually I figured out that this was the visceral tension that I had been feeling all along. Under the contested meanings of literacy, there was tension between conflicting beliefs and values about the meaning of learning. This last section of the chapter describes the changes in the adult literacy field that I have experienced since 2005. This includes the federal conservative government’s response to the results of ALL and the replacement of the National Literacy Secretariat with the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES). I examine how literacy was re-constructed as an essential skill, as well as policy-makers heightened focus on assessment and accountability. Finally, I examine the impact of a combination of events at the time of release of the PIAAC results in 2013.
In the lead-up to the publication of the ALL results, practitioners and advocates had hoped that it would show that literacy had improved since the IALS survey nearly ten years prior. However, the 2005 ALL report claimed that there was no improvement of literacy rates between IALS and the ALL. This news continued to be highlighted by governments and policy entrepreneurs. For example Grenier, et al. (2008) states, “the portion of working age Canadians with literacy proficiency below [IALS] level 3 had not changed since 1994 the year the first comparative survey of adult literacy was undertaken” (p. 27). Along with many other practitioners, I experienced a sense of dissonance about this claim. There was no clear connection between what learners said about their own progress and the ALL results. The news of lack of improvement in literacy rates created a heightened a sense of worry among practitioners and advocates. They were (rightly) concerned that literacy programs would be blamed for this lack of progress after substantial investment from federal and provincial governments. Although it is not valid to interpret these types of surveys (with their limitations) as revealing the strengths or weakness of adult literacy education, the government began to make assumptions about the shortcomings of the field. As Smythe (2015) explains, “This idea that literacy groups were to blame for the lack of significant increases in literacy levels between 1994 and 2003 suggests the confusion even elected officials experience in applying results of population level surveys to actual learners and programs” (p.11). However, blaming the literacy field is exactly what began to happen shortly after the Conservative party was elected federally in 2006. This government replaced the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) with the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES) and began to shift its funding priorities towards essential skills programming. These policy changes reduced the funding that was originally designated by the NLS to federal-provincial cost sharing
agreements that supported capacity building projects such as “research … practitioner training curriculum development and other … literacy training.” (Hayes, 2013, p. 39).

The years between 2005 and 2014 was a period of intensive policy focus on literacy through the narrowing single lens of economic measurement. The newly formed Conservative federal government used the IALS and ALL data as rationale to steer policy toward an exclusively human capital construct of literacy (Smythe, 2015). The federal and provincial governments began to fund more quantitative studies on the survey data (Hayes, 2013). Two examples of such projects are Canadian Council on Learning’s project on segmentation of the two lower IALS levels, and the International Reading Skills Survey project by Grenier, et al. (2008). Thorn (2009), the OECD’s senior analyst who oversaw the PIAAC survey stated that compared with other OECD member countries “Canada has been particularly active in exploiting data from the IALS and ALL(S)” (p. 11). The IALS and the ALL ‘data’ was presented at most government sponsored adult literacy conferences and related professional events, including events that were specifically on IALS/ALL, such as the 2011 IALS Institute (Centre for Literacy, 2011), which I further describe in Chapter 4.

My experience during these years was like watching an enactment of Graham and Slee’s (2008) description of “writing under erasure.” Literacy (as social practice) and learning (as critical pedagogy) was being scored out through the merging of words that brought about different meanings. This happened when literacy was merged with essential skills, within the federal government’s Office of Literacy and Essential Skills. The re-naming of the NLS to the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES) was a powerful maneuvering of language use by policy-
makers. Shortly after the OLES was established literacy programs and organizations began using “literacy and essentials skills” more regularly in their titles and taglines. It seemed that the word literacy by itself was no longer sufficient to be legitimate. I experienced this ‘merger’ of literacy and essential skills, “LES,” as a glaring indication of the policy move away from a key premise of basic literacy education: that learning happens by strongly drawing on learners and practitioners knowledge.

The pressure on practitioners to take up the ‘LES’ narrative was based on normative assumptions that the IALS data was proof of the ‘existence’ of a literacy skills crisis, and the ALL data as proof of basic literacy programs as a poor return on investment. An example of the impact of this policy shift can be found in the State of the Literacy and Essential Skills Field report by the Canadian Literacy Learning Network (2012), which notes,

Programs in the community that have worked in the past are not always effective in today’s results-driven, fast-paced society because they focus purely on reading and writing. While there is still a place for programs that deliver literacy there is more demand for Literacy and Essential Skills programs customized to meet specific needs of learners and employers. (p. 28)

The CLLN was viewed as a lead organization for practitioners and learners. It had a long history of advocacy and activism since it beginning as the Movement for Canadian Literacy (MCL) in 1977. However, the pressure to ‘get on board’ with the essential skills policy agenda persuaded organizations such as the CLLN to take up the neoliberal discourse of deficit (Crooks et al, 2008; Pinsent-Johnson, 2015; Smythe, 2015). In hindsight I understand these discursive moments as symptomatic of the hegemony of normalcy, where the re-invention of literacy occurs in plain
sight, as written words, yet at the time it was confounding to me about what these texts fully represented. This was how I experienced the policy-driven constructed merger of ‘literacy and essential skills.’

Smythe (2015) notes that since the ALL there has “been a steady decline in adult literacy funding” (p. 16), and by 2011 the vast majority of federal project funding was directed toward essential skills projects and assessment tools based on the IALS framework. A Government of Canada (2012) evaluation on the federal program that managed the OLES noted that as of 2009 the policy direction had “shift[ed] focus from literacy to essential skills, and […] from family/community-based projects to workplace projects” (HRSDC, 2012, p. 62). A key argument that was used to overhaul adult literacy education was the artificially constructed threshold of “Level Three” (Smythe, 2015, p. 10). Although highly contested, the claim by the IALS authors that Level Three is the minimum required level of literacy continued to have powerful influence over adult literacy policy in Canada (Atkinson, 2015; Darville, 1999; Druine & Wildemeersch, 2000; Hamilton & Barton, 2000; Jackson, 2005; Pinsent-Johnson, 2014; Smythe, 2015). For example, the OLES newsletter ‘Insights’ from March 2011 described the government’s decision to prioritize funding towards programs that claim to have IALS Level Two learners because these types of learners are “just below the Level 3 threshold [and] largely employed and could see huge benefit – for themselves and their employers – with relatively modest ES [Essential Skills] upgrading” (OLES, 2011, p. 2). The newsletter goes on to state that these programs are a better return on investment because learners in these programs can quickly up-skill over into Level Three. What is missing in this narrative is that these learners are in fact already quite
literate when they started the program. So the claim of a ‘better return’ is actually an act of erasure, as the needs of ‘Level One’ learners are being swept under the rug.

By the time the PIAAC survey results were published in late 2013 the adult literacy field had entered a period of severe funding loss. Within a year, two national organizations, NALD/Copian and CLLN would shut down. Their shuttering erased much of the accumulated practitioner knowledge and resources. The federal government restructured its provincial transfer funding for ‘literacy and essential skills’ in a way that made it more difficult to fund basic literacy programs (Hayes, 2013; Smythe, 2015). Meanwhile, the OECD publicly refuted the claim about Level Three as the minimum threshold for literacy proficiency. In a presentation at the Centre for Literacy’s 2013 Summer Institute on PIAAC, OECD’s William Thorn stated,

“We [OECD] are making no claim that Level Three is essential to manage in modern life. That [claim] is manifestly false. […] That kind of description is a supplementary interpretation which has been put on those levels that I don’t think is justified and I think which is a view that is shared among other people as well.” (Thorn, 2013)

Hearing the revelation that Level Three was not what it had been claimed to be and that its interpretation by Canadian policy-makers was not justified was like learning about a big lie. The claim that nearly half of all adults in Canada do not have the minimum literacy skills evaporated in an instant, yet the skills deficit narrative continues to circulate in the field and in policy and the media.
So, where do basic literacy learners end up in the current measurement regime? The 2013 PIAAC report, *Skills Outlook: First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills* identified a new “Below Level One” category and below that, designated a “missing category” to capture individuals who were not able to participate in the survey because they were “unable to speak or read the language of the assessment, have difficulty reading or writing, or have learning or mental disability” (OECD, 2013, p. 79). It is important to recognize that the ‘missing’ adults who fit that profile are exactly the population served by basic literacy programs. But from a policy standpoint such programs have been redefined as a poor investment. Basic literacy learners, especially those with minimum or no reading and writing skills continue to be enrolled in literacy programs. Sometimes they are required to be there as a condition of social assistance, such as in Ontario. They are repositioned even with the program itself to a location of deficit. It is in this current neo-liberal discourse that basic literacy learners are being measured and categorized, valued or shamed, which is further explored in the following chapter.
Chapter 4
Making the Deficit Character

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I examine the disconnection between the literacy policy discourse, which I argue focuses mostly on deficit, and how learners understand themselves and make meaning of their learning and literacy. First I examine the discursive production of adult literacy learners as deficit characters in the measurement regime. Then I turn to the voices of participants\(^2\) in my research to consider how learners’ feelings and emotions, their embodied knowledge, gets re-invented as deficit and detrimental social outcomes in the technological language of literacy as numbers (Gorur, 2015). I draw on Bartlett’s (2007a) interrogation of the social construction of literacy and speech shaming and how this conceals policy and social norming practices of inequality and oppression. I then discuss the focus groups participants’ response to a selected excerpt from a Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) report as an example of the deficit narrative in which life experience is reframed as social and economic consequences of ‘low’ literacy. I conclude this chapter by arguing that the measurement regime as a normalizing project needs the deficit character, regardless of its prejudicial disavow of learner’s embodied knowledge (Graham & Slee, 2008; Titchkosky & Michalko, 2009).

\(^2\) As I discussed in Chapter 2 there were three focus groups with thirteen participants in total. All focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed. There were eight women and five men and their age ranged from early twenties to mid fifties. Eight participants stated they were Aboriginal or Métis, five said they had a disability (physical, learning, developmental). Two participants said they had immigrated to Canada. (See page 48 for full description of the focus groups)
4.2 Learners as deficit characters

The IALS and ALL were credited with providing authoritative evidence on the “characteristics of adults with low skills” (OECD & Statistics Canada, 2011, p. 309). In my experience the characteristics of the “significant number of adults with low skills” (OECD & Statistics Canada, 2005, p. 31) was well documented, so I found it surprising that after more than a decade of studies and surveys the 2011 OECD and Statistics Canada *Literacy for Life* report concluded that, “Beyond the fact that low proficiency is pervasive, little is known about the precise characteristics of the deficits of the low skilled population” (p. 309). The report goes on to say that more evidence of those ‘deficit characteristics’ is needed in order to determine “where remedial interventions should focus attention” (OECD & Statistics Canada, 2011, p. 309). The authors indicate that the next OECD adult literacy survey, PIAAC, will produce this evidence by “increase[ing] the amount of information available about adults with poor literacy” (p. 309).

From my perspective as a practitioner there seemed to be a lot of such information already available. The non-profit National Adult Literacy Database organization (NALD), established in 1992, had an extensive repository of research and resources. Funded by the federal government, it housed thousands of publications from research and development projects. It was the main repository for practitioner led research-in-practice projects. Instead of information on deficit characteristics most of the (qualitative) research-in-practice projects provided rich data on learners as whole persons. These projects offered detailed information on holistic approaches to learning and meaningful assessment for learners. Informed by social practice theories and critical pedagogical approaches much of this “new, rich, qualitative research and practitioner-generated research” was viewed as contributing to a “new era of literacy advocacy and [program]
planning” (Faris & Blunt, 2006, p. 49). As the national repository for research of all kinds, NALD was credited as “a most valuable resource for the field” (Faris & Blunt, 2006, p. 49). NALD, (later renamed as Copian) also contributed to Canada’s international reputation as having a strong practice-informed adult literacy research community (St. Clair, 2007; Shohet, 2001). Sadly, government actions indicated it did not value this form of research. In 2010 the federal government began moving away from funding practitioner-driven and practice informed research (HRSDC, 2012). In 2014 the federal government ceased its support for practitioner informed research on holistic approaches to learning, and NALD had closed its doors. These steps suggest that this important field of research so valued by the community, did not provide the government the kind of information they needed to support the policy direction that they were seeking.

I remember feeling frustrated as I experienced, along with other practitioners a certain pressure from government and IALS supporters to overlook our professional knowledge about learners and learning. Practitioners were now instructed to look to the OECD assessments to learn “how to most effectively use IALS results to plan and deliver programming” (practitioner statement at IALS Institute, Banff, Oct 23-25, 2011). Starting in 2009 I observed a rather sharp turn in practitioner professional development and learning events. Conferences like the IALS Institute and other professional development events began to focus primarily on the value of OECD literacy assessments and workplace skills. I saw a steady increase of government sponsored training events on how to use in-class assessment tools that were aligned with the IALS framework. I was involved in a number of projects that developed classroom assessment tools that were based on the IALS scale and levels. While I prepared to attend a national conference on PIAAC I expressed my concerns about the ‘hype of the assessments’ on a public blog for literacy
practitioners and scholars who were critical of the prevailing assessment discourse in adult literacy education. I wrote,

Just 2 months before the PIAAC survey results are to be released by the Canadian government and the buzz about the importance of these international surveys is more annoying than ever. The IALS and PIAAC surveys have most definitely become central policy and institutional filters that lay over programs with a forceful discourse. But all the hurrah [about PIAAC] continues to provide little in the way of relevant resources and real-life knowledge about the process and practices of learning literacy…(remember the learner?). (Gardner, 2013)

The blog was created in 2011 by academics and literacy practitioners in response to the IALS Institute in Banff, Alberta, a government sponsored national conference on the OECD literacy assessments. I was very much involved in this conference as the college I worked at was a co-host. I remember feeling dumbfounded by the ways in which learners were talked about by many of the IALS experts. Learners were represented in the form of aggregated charts of deficit characteristics and at-risk populations (Hamilton, 2012).

This conference, which I helped to organize, was one of the most difficult experiences in my professional career. To me it was a spectacle of objectification of adult literacy learners and I felt like I was complicit in this normalizing project. Disability Studies thinking about normalcy helped me to make sense of what felt like an exercise in gazing through a discursive lens of test-scores and low-literacy statistics to see how the ‘deficit characteristics of the low skilled population’ as subject matter is manifested in learners in adult literacy programs. Normalization needs the subject to represent abnormality (Erevelles 2005; Titchkosky & Michalko, 2009). In
the case of adult literacy, the subject of policy texts is the deficit characteristics represented in the IALS/ALL data, and the subject in the flesh is the learner and adults that should be learners. In the IALS discourse the deficit characteristics are statistical representations of undereducated and usually racialized, disabled, poor and under or unemployed bodies. In these professional learning settings the colonization and objectification of the subject(s) is taken for granted, discussed as fact. It didn’t seem to matter that the two adult literacy learners at the IALS Institute conference spoke less and virtually fell silent. They became invisible in the glare of the statistical representations of who they are.

My experience at this conference reminded me of a sentence I read ten years prior. In the Statistics Canada (1996) report on the first IALS survey, the authors said, “Literacy…rewards those who are proficient and penalizes those who are not.” (p. 76). This statement points to normalizing literacy as an instrument of social ordering in what Darville (1999) and Hamilton (2001) call a literacy regime, and what I have called a measurement regime. They argue that the OECD literacy assessment project “dovetails with the literacy regime” which “encompasses interpenetrating levels of discursive and organizational processes, unfolding over time and in diverse locations” (Darville, 1999, p. 274). In the statistical language of IALS, literacy is constructed as an entity unto itself capable of wielding power, especially over individuals and collective groups viewed as ‘naturally’ literacy deficient. However, this construction of literacy as object is misleading as Darville (1999) reminds us that literacy is “always a conceptual construction...always and only an abstraction” (p. 273). The concept of literacy here is actually more of a lens, held up by policy-makers and IALS supporters who reward a particular literate body and punish those constructed as being in deficit.
The deficit discourse has a long history of circulation in the adult literacy field (Darville, 1992; Graff, 2013; Quigley, 1997; Walker & Rubenson, 2014; Wickert, 1991). As I discussed in Chapter 3, with the emergence of large-scale standardized testing of literacy in the 1980’s a new statistical language entered into this dominant discourse. The arrival of IALS brought forward an assertion that the negative image of illiteracy was being replaced with recognition of the legitimacy of a newly defined problem of adult literacy. Perhaps most practitioners, myself included, did not notice that the OECD assessments were actually a progression of a deficit discourse in a new measurement regime paradigm. In 2001, the year I began working in adult literacy, New Literacy Studies scholar Mary Hamilton warned about the impact of this discourse on programs and learners, she said,

> Once the IALS has arrived in the performance indicators it is a short step from this to worksheets and teacher discourse of the classroom, completing the reorganization of learner identity [emphasis added] that has already started through the survey process itself and the public circulation of the IALS findings.

(Hamilton, 2001, p. 191)

This work of reorganizing learner identity within a prevailing deficit discourse has become increasingly transparent and intensified during the past decade. I will describe my experience of beginning to work in adult literacy and how I experienced this dominant discourse at the local level. I began working in adult literacy not in the classroom with learners, but in a community development project called ‘Connecting Literacy to Community’ (CLC). The CLC was carried out by adult literacy programs in different communities in Alberta between 2001 and 2003. In each community, local non-profit organizations and government services that did not have adult
literacy programs were invited to participate in the project. Participating community-based organizations were selected because they served individuals and families who were living in poverty; and low literacy, low education and poverty were understood as intrinsically interrelated. The premise of the project was that many clients of these organizations most likely have difficulty with reading and writing. The expressed objectives of the CLC were that by participating in the project community-based organizations and service providers would be able to better serve their clients that have limited literacy skills, and would also be able to refer those clients to the local adult literacy program. The federal government’s National Literacy Secretariat funded this project as part of its broader agenda of reducing the low literacy rates on the IALS scale. When the CLC project was proposed to the National Literacy Secretariat at the beginning of the 21st century the IALS was a topmost concern for Canadian policy-makers and the IALS data – discourse – was very persuasive in the government’s decision to fund the CLC project (OECD & Statistics Canada, 1997; Statistics Canada, 1996).

As a team of community literacy specialists (as we were called) our job in this project was to create partnerships with community organizations and government public services, and provide literacy awareness workshops and organizational audits to help make the programs and services more accessible to adults with limited reading and writing skills. Our job was to convince staff and volunteers in these organizations to review their programs and services and identify text-based barriers that some of their clients most likely experience. Examples of text-based barriers include intake forms that clients have to read and complete in writing, or requiring individuals to use a computer to make an appointment or register for a program. Other examples are programs that require individuals to be able to read and write in order to participate in a program. Before
connecting with community organizations we met as a project team to learn how to carry out this community development project. Part of the initial training was reading through the OECD and Statistics Canada reports on IALS, and others materials using the IALS data. We had to learn how to make the data and information relatable to the participating organizations. We had to bring together the story of the ‘national literacy crisis’ to the local level (Sandlin & Clark, 2009). This story was always about people and as a team of experienced community educators we were guided by our knowledge about adult learning principles and by our values about human dignity and equality. The project manager supported us to be creative and flexible to best respond to our specific local communities. We recognized that this project offered an opportunity for professional learning for literacy practitioners. We decided to use critical reflection and research-in-practice approaches to guide the process of project. I produced two reports for this project, a handbook for practitioners; and research report on literacy specialists prior knowledge and experience (Gardner, 2003a, 2003b).

I was midway through my masters of education program when I joined the project and I was taking a course on international perspectives on literacy. This course introduced me to New Literacy Studies (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Crowther, Hamilton & Tett, 2001; Hamilton, 2000; Street 1984). New Literacy Studies scholars assert that the concept of literacy needs to be considered within social, cultural and historical contexts. Unlike the dominant functional skills approach, literacy in New Literacy Studies is viewed as social practice, which is about how people use and make meaning of reading, writing and written text. As social practices literacy, (and literacies) are patterned by social and political institutions and power relationships. New Literacy Studies suggests thinking about literacy as multiple where “some literacies become
more dominant, visible and influential than others” (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p.7). The social practices concept of literacy helped us to articulate a rationale for the project, which was,

Adults with limited literacy have a right to access community services and to participate in programs and initiatives; and,

Service providers and their agencies have a responsibility to address literacy as an accessibility issue, and to reduce literacy barriers to their programs and services.

(Gardner, 2003a, p. 6)

The notion of accessibility resonated with many staff members in the participating organizations and they agreed with the idea that literacy should not be a barrier when people try to access information and services.

A key resource that we used in the CLC project was a series of ‘factsheets’ produced by the Movement for Canadian Literacy (MCL). The MCL produced thirteen Factsheets between 2000 and 2004 on a range of literacy related topics and were used extensively by local, provincial and national adult literacy organizations for public awareness and promotion (Figure 2).

| 1. | Literacy in Canada (2000) |
| 2. | Literacy and Citizenship (2000) |
| 3. | Literacy and Justice (2002) |
| 4. | Literacy and Health (2002) |
| 5. | Literacy and Learning Disabilities (2000) |
| 7. | Literacy and Poverty (2000) |
| 9. | Literacy and the Workforce (2000) |
| 10. | Literacy and Families (2000) |
These factsheets used the statistical language of the IALS reports as well as information from other sources. The factsheets were highly regarded by practitioners and were commonly used in practitioner and tutor training. The tone and content of the factsheets reflected the knowledge of practitioner experiences with learners. They were action oriented and seemed to respectfully describe adults who had difficulty with reading and writing even though the language of deficit was also very present. I authored the Literacy and Disabilities Fact Sheet when I worked on a separate project called the Literacy and Disability Study. I will describe how we used these factsheets in the CLC project to try to show the ease in which the normalization of the deficient character emerges despite our effort to resist the deficit narrative.

All the community literacy specialists used the factsheets in presentations and workshops. We would begin our presentations and workshops with first presenting the IALS statistics to draw a picture of ‘who’ “struggle(s) with reading and writing” (Gardner, 2003a, p. 34) and to show how many people are on the ‘lower’ levels of the IALS scale. Depending on the type of organization I would select the most relevant MCL factsheet on literacy, for example, poverty, justice, health, learning disabilities, or older adults. The various topics of the series of factsheet were very convenient as our project worked with a range of organizations including community resource centres, social services, libraries, food banks, health centres, homeless shelters, and recreation programs. The MCL factsheets were presented along with the IALS statistics as evidence about the problem of ‘low literacy’, and this ‘evidence’ produced a certain image of individuals. The
aim was for community organizations to recognize their own clients in the descriptions of people in the factsheets. Figure 1.3 has excerpts from some of the factsheets. My interest in these statements is that they implicitly and explicitly construct a picture of deficit.

| Excerpts from some fact sheets in the Literacy for Life Fact Sheet Series, MCL |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| **Factsheet**                  | **Statement**                                                                                     |
| Literacy in Canada             | • Almost 50% of Canadian adults can’t work well with words and numbers.                           |
|                                 | • 22% have difficulty reading and few basic skills for working with text.                           |
|                                 | • 26% are people with limited skills who read but do not read well.                                |
| Literacy and citizenship        | • Literacy barriers force people to the margins where they become alienated from participating in the broader society. |
|                                 | • Less literate people are disenfranchised from power, control and decision-making (in democratic systems). |
| Literacy and disabilities       | • People with disabilities make up a disproportionate amount of the 48% of Canadian adults who function at the two lowest literacy levels. |
| Literacy and poverty            | • People from poor families as well as the long-term unemployed, seniors, native people, prisoners, people with disabilities, and racial and cultural minorities all have higher rates of both illiteracy and poverty. |
| Literacy and health             | • People with lower literacy skills are more likely to be under stress.                           |
|                                 | • People with low literacy skills are more likely to work and live in unsafe or dangerous environments and suffer the consequences. |
| Literacy and learning disabilities | • Disproportionate numbers of adults with LDs can be found in prison (30-70%), on welfare (25-40%) and in (low-skill) job training programs (15-30%). |
| Literacy and Aboriginal success | • Canada’s Aboriginal population was not factored into the IALS conducted in 1994/96. This study revealed that almost 50% of Canadian adults can’t work well with words and numbers. The reality is Canada’s Aboriginal peoples have even lower literacy rates. This disadvantage is compounded by the inter-connectedness of literacy to poverty, poor health and high unemployment and crime rates. |
| Literacy and families           | • Family poverty and low literacy have a negative impact on a child’s readiness to learn at school. |
|                                 | • Literacy and educational achievement often continue from generation to generation.                |
These statements draw a personification of low literacy as inadequate bodies (Walker & Rubenson, 2014). I want to make an important point about what is happening when written text, like these fact sheets are used to ‘make the case’ for adult literacy as a social concern: In the doing of reading these texts about people who cannot read such texts assume the normal idea that the reader is literate. Titchkosky (2008b) points out that, “[B]eing literate in literate culture, comes with privilege, but it also comes with risk….as I embody the proficiency of the reader, I risk not grasping how this identity governs my relationship to others and to myself” (p. 118).

The participating staff and volunteers recognized their clients in these descriptions of what low literacy looks like. In the presentations and workshops the conversations built upon this experience of recognition and then treaded back and forth across the fine line of making assumptions that treat individuals as examples of the “detrimental effects of low literacy” (Faris & Blunt, 2006, p. 8) versus seeing individual stories as example of systemic, social and institutional barriers. Although the factsheets challenged the reader to “take action on structural factors, such as poverty” (Movement for Canadian Literacy, 2002, p. 2), it was difficult to avoid the ease in which these conversations slid into ‘illiterate’ stereotypes circulating in the public discourse on adult literacy.

The CLC project offered an opportunity for service providers from the various participating organizations to talk about adult literacy. Often the discussion would focus in on the ‘invisibility’ of literacy. Many staff members said that they had never talked about literacy at work. During the discussions they said that literacy was about learning to read in school, and they talked about
‘illiteracy’, as a more familiar concept than ‘adult literacy’ or ‘low literacy’. Illiteracy was familiar because it was socially, and emotionally meaningful. In the workshop discussions a number of service providers shared stories about family members who they described as “illiterate,” or “basically illiterate.” The IALS statistics and accompanying ‘facts’ on the negative consequences in basically all aspects of life seemed to encourage participants to share these personal stories. Compared to talking about clients and literacy, this conversation had a different tone when they told stories about their own family members. There was an unspoken acknowledgement that these personal stories were confessional. They talked about how their relatives felt ashamed about not being able to read or write and not being educated (enough). As Bartlett (2007a) points out, “One of the words frequently associated with ‘illiteracy’ is shame.” (p. 547). These discussions with community service providers about adult literacy illustrate the ease with which normative constructions of personal shaming stories converge with convincing statistical evidence that is represented in the embodiment of the literate deficit character (Collins & Ferri, 2016; Horsman 2006; Tett & Maclachlan, 2008).

**4.3 Shame as deficit**

I now turn to the voices of the participants in my research as they had a lot to say about shame, shaming and literacy. Similar to the conversations I had with the service providers in the Connecting Literacy to Community project twelve years prior, the word ‘illiteracy’ was also more familiar to the research participants than the word ‘literacy’. The difference however between the service providers in the CLC project and the participants in this research study is that as learners in adult literacy programs the research participants are themselves the subject of illiteracy. They are the illiterate body. Shame is socially constructed to be a powerful thing in the
form of words, looks, movements, silences, systems and it is always in relation with others.
Shame is often thought of as a noun but its force is known in the form of a verb: shaming (Bartlett, 2008; Walker, 2017).

The participants spoke about how their internalized feelings of shame shaped their self perception and how they felt others perceived them. In the focus groups the participants shared stories about being seen as ‘illiterate’. One learner, who I call LU told a story about an experience that made him feel judged by his coworkers: “These three employees were saying something about it [illiteracy], about learning how to read and kids having a hard time in school, so I think that’s what they called what I was because I didn’t learn how to read when I was a kid. That changes everything” (LU). The doing of shaming happens in moments like this, in overheard conversations about illiteracy. For LU his internalized feelings of shame from life experiences became an identity of embodied trouble and fear reflected in his statement about why he joined his literacy class: “I came here to stay out of trouble. I just got out of jail. Didn’t know if it was for me, but the class is good. I stuck it out but I don’t like coming downtown at night cuz I don’t want to have trouble” (LU).

LU is an Indigenous person and he said that he always felt that people looked at him in a certain way, “so I just keep my head down and keep walking.” (LU2). Bartlett (2007a) argues that adult learners experience literacy shaming as a “cultural phenomenon” (p. 554). She describes this as social interactions in which individual deficiencies and social and racialized status are convincingly reaffirmed to the learner. She refers to this phenomenon as “the micropolitics of shame and shaming” (Bartlett, 2007a, p. 548). This is reflected in LU’s stories about his
colleagues at work, his reason for coming to the part-time evening literacy class, and his physical and emotional experience of traveling to and from class. Literacy shaming brings to the foreground one’s ability to perform the technical tasks of reading and writing, but the meaning of this shaming occurs through the socio-political construction of embodied identity of race, class, gender and disability (Bartlett, 2007a; Horsman, 2006; Stewart, 2011; Tett & Maclachlan, 2008).

Another learner talked about his fear of being found out, he said, “I was feeling so ashamed to let somebody know that I can’t be able to read” (DA). Other participants in the focus group responded with a “me too” empathetic nod. DA said, “I was so afraid, to let people know that I can’t read or write. I always feared to be found out. When I came to Canada I would go out and look at jobs and they’d say you got to fill out this form. I was frustrated and feeling so embarrassed. You just have to leave” (DA).

I had previously worked with DA in the adult literacy program and knew that he had a full-time job. He talked about how he made sure that he was never in a position where he had to read at work so he would not get “caught out” (DA). He said he doesn’t like it when, “People saying you are dumb because you can’t read, you can’t write” (DA). He said that he didn’t think he was dumb, but he was frustrated with always worrying about his reading and writing being exposed. Another participant described that she was afraid of feeling ‘caught out’, she said, “You know, you feel like you’re always going to fail, its embarrassing” (JA). Fear was a common feeling among participants. They spoke about feeling social pressure to act in ways that made them ‘pass’ as literate. For most participants this was a daily experience. They were very aware of
their ‘less-than literate enough’ identity and had an understanding of the social currency of the norming assumptions about what is included in being literate.

Being literate (enough) is represented in images of the dominant culture’s idealized body engaging with text in ways that imply the ability to read, for example text messaging. Being literate affords the privilege of choice to read and write or not. To explain what I mean by ‘privilege of choice’ I will borrow a story from Margaret Meek, literacy and children’s literary scholar. In her book *On being literate* (1991) she described that while waiting to take the train one day she realized that she was able to take for granted her ability to read written texts such as the written instructions on a newly installed ticket machine at the station. She could assume that those instructions were there to help her, even if she didn’t read them. She said, “the event like buying a ticket…. makes me aware that one of the most powerful assumptions about being literate is my confidence about what I needn’t read.” (Meek, 1991, p. 5). This seemingly minute literacy moment of noticing the ticket machine instructions reflects an assumption that, “Everyone knows that to be at home in a literate society is a feeling as well as a fact” (p. 3) I understand Meek’s notion of ‘fact’ as the technical doing of reading the instructions, however the significant point I see in Meek’s statement is this: the assumption of being able to read affords a certain privilege, that is feeling confident in having a choice to read or not read. Feelings and emotion have as much to do with the social meaning of being literate (or not) as performing the technical skills of reading and writing (or not). I want to emphasize that the technical-doing and the emotional-doing with printed texts are inseparable. This contrasts with the policy discourse that values the technical and turns the emotion into a weakness or personal problem. Here, the emotional presence in literacy learning is stripped down to measurable skills,
and in the OECD international surveys emotions become measurable deficits. For example, the 
PIAAC survey report claims, “individuals with lower proficiency in literacy are...less likely to 
trust others” (OECD, 2013, p.3).

Emotion is a valid way of knowing and making meaning of self and the world (Bartlett, 2007a; 
Dirkx, 2001; Horsman, 1999; Miller & King, 2011). Emotion was present in all the 
conversations with the participants. In the focus groups the participants responded to questions 
about why they joined their program and their views on learning and literacy with saying how 
they felt. DA described feeling embarrassed about how he talked, he said that he didn’t 
pronounce words properly because of his accent, He said that when he was young he didn’t learn 
how to, “Speak proper because the school was not good” (DA). The notion of not having the 
‘proper speech’ resonated with other participants in the focus group. They shared their 
experiences about when they chose not to speak in certain social situations because they knew 
their speech would be judged. One participant said she doesn’t talk much with people she doesn’t 
know because, “People make fun of you, you know. I don’t want to be looked down on” (SH). 
Bartlett (2007a) describes this as “speech shaming...the belief in one correct way to say things” 
(p. 556). The discursive valuing of educated speech “mark(s) uneducated speech” (Bartlett, 
2007a, p. 556) as shameful and has an accumulative impact on one’s sense of identity. Literacy 
and speech shaming is shaming the whole person. This dynamic points to layers of public and 
policy discourse as key contributors to the internalization of the ‘shame of adult literacy’ 
narrative (Walker & Rubenson, 2014). The narrative, in effect, lays blame upon the individual 
learner for the way they have encountered social barriers and then internalized social judgments 
about who they are. In this way, shame itself is a meta-deficit hidden in the findings of the
OECD international adult literacy survey that state adults with “low levels of skills are at an increased risk of not being able to cope with or adapt to change’ (OECD & Statistics Canada, 2011 p. 213).

4.4 Life experience as deficit

In basic adult literacy programs practitioners recognize the importance of acknowledging learners lived experiences; honoring and drawing on learners’ experiences and knowledge is the basis of learner-centred education (Barton, 2009; Battell, 2001; Jackson & Schaetti, 2014; Lefebre et al, 2006; Tett & Maclachlan, 2007). Learners’ knowledge and life experiences are valued in critical, feminist and social practice pedagogies and inform the ways in which most basic literacy practitioners work (Brookfield & Holst, 2011; Freire, 2011; hooks, 1994; Ramdeholl, 2011; Tett, Hamilton & Crowther, 2012). All this is in great contrast to the stance of the OECD literacy policy. In the policy discourse skills are viewed as valuable and life experience is reframed as a social and economic consequence of literacy level. Public texts are viewed as bearing facts and evidence that are perceived to be the legitimate source of authority in the dominant narrative. For example, the OECD and Statistics Canada reports are consistently cited by media and advocacy organizations and are favoured by governments and think tanks such as the Conference Board of Canada (Walker & Rubenson, 2014). The dominant deficit discourse is persistently written into the multitude of public texts. It is not surprising that practitioners also adopt the discourse of deficit to gain credence with funders and policy-makers (Sandlin & Clark, 2009). This is illustrated in the example above of the MCL factsheet on Literacy and Health, which asserts that, “People with low literacy skills are more likely to work and live in unsafe or dangerous environments and suffer the consequences” (MCL, 2002, p. 2).
Suffering the consequences is a blaming (shaming) narrative about individuals not being literate enough (Belzer & Pickard, 2015; Sandlin & Clark, 2009; Walker & Rubenson, 2014). Bartlett (2007a) however, points out that implying individual fault also actively conceals those policies and social norms that produce and uphold social and political structures of inequality. She states, “Shaming relies upon several powerful language ideologies that individualize blame and obscure the social arrangements that produce racialized and classed educational categories of people” (Bartlett, 2007a, p. 559). Bartlett’s observation about the micropolitics of literacy shaming makes me consider how emotion, specifically shame and shaming, is sewn into the written language of neoliberal individualism (Black 2016; Giroux, 1997; Roberts, 2004; Sandlin & Clark, 2009). I want to add written text as a source of shaming to Bartlett’s (2007a) argument that “emotions reflect and reinforce…the cultural production of inequality” (p. 551). Reading texts such as the MCL literacy and health factsheet reinforce the ideological measurement regime claims about the existence of a literacy crisis as a “national shame” (Walker & Rubenson, 2014, p. 158). This claim depends on the active re-telling of a narrative of negative life experiences tied to low-literate identities.

To examine how these texts are read and interpreted by learners I asked the participants in my research focus groups to review excerpts from three documents that were perceived by practitioners, advocates and policy-makers as having authority on adult literacy in Canada. The excerpts were selected from the following three sources: a 2006 forum report by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada; the OECD 2013 Programme for Assessment of Adult Competencies, (PIAAC) Survey of Adult Skills first report; and, the factsheet on literacy and health from the Movement Canadian Literacy national organization (Appendix H). The purpose
of reading and discussing these statements with participants in the focus groups was two-fold:
First, basic literacy learners rarely have access to these type of texts, even though they are indirectly the subject. Secondly, as the in-the-flesh subjects of the constructed ‘low literate population’ I wanted to hear what learners would say when invited to critically review what is written about them. I wanted to have a dialogue about the dominant discourse of literacy deficiency with people who were represented in those texts. In the focus groups I read each excerpt out loud and described each document that the statement came from, including the document title, author, date and organization. The participants had copies of each statement that they could follow as well. After I read each statement I asked the participants to respond to the following questions: What do you think this is about? Do you agree or disagree with anything in the statement? What do you think this says about adult literacy learners? We discussed each one separately, with plenty of time for extended conversations on each statement.

One excerpt we discussed was from a report on a national forum on adult literacy that was organized by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) on adult literacy on June 19-20, 2006 in Prince George, British Columbia. This sixty-five page report summarized the forum purpose and activities with short descriptions of presentations, workshops, offering a list of recommendations. The forum was part of CMEC’s national action plan on literacy and approximately one hundred delegates from across Canada attended the two-day event. Most of the delegates were education and training ministry staff from provincial and territorial governments, federal policy-makers and HRSDC staff, including the National Literacy Secretariat, and college administrators, consultants, and executive directors from the non-profit literacy organizations. A small number of literacy practitioners and academic researchers and
one learner also attended. The forum occurred shortly after the OECD and Statistics Canada released the reports on the results of the second international adult literacy survey (ALLS). Some presenters highlighted the point that the literacy rates in Canada had not improved since the first OECD survey and this was viewed by government and consultant presenters as a “justifiable cause for concern” (Faris & Blunt, 2006, p. 9) about “Canada’s global economic competitiveness and national quality of life” (p. 1). The majority of presenters took up the OECD and policy-makers “neoliberal….market orientation” (Gorur, 2015, p. 3) way of treating literacy as skills. The authors of the forum report, one of whom was a moderator at the forum and the other was recording the presentations and discussions, expressed a similar viewpoint. In the report’s conclusion, named Forum Reflections’ they wrote, “Now…thanks to the IALS and ALLS, and other survey instruments literacy is quantifiable, and a variable for insertion into the economists’ equation” (Faris & Blunt, 2006, p. 49). Even though some presenters argued for holistic learner-centred assessment methods that honour diversity and difference, the extent of the deficit discourse reflected in the normalized social positioning of learners as consequential subjects of their ‘poor skills’.

From the report of the CMEC forum I selected two sentences from a paragraph in the executive summary under the heading ‘direct and indirect learner support’. The excerpt I shared with the participants in the focus groups was this: “Adult literacy learners live their daily lives challenged by the detrimental effects of their low literacy…The enduring effects of their life experiences include a lack of self-confidence, social isolation, poor communication skills, and lack of knowledge about available resources” (Faris & Blunt, 2006, p. 8). Most of the participants initially agreed with this statement. One participant said, “I see myself in there” (SH). But when
the participants shared what they thought ‘detrimental effects’ meant, and the conversations turned to issues of social injustice. For example, one participant spoke about being bullied because of his disability, he stated, “when I was a kid I was always picked on, so I learned how to fight back” (HA). He talked about being the “class clown” to protect himself, and he described how his stepmother helped him learn: “I was a slow learner, I couldn’t even speak proper when I was a little kid. But my stepmother sat down with me at the kitchen table and you know, what’s this and what’s that? And I mean she spent three or four years helping me” (HA).

HA understood the social oppression of disability and he was well aware from his own experience that “Nondisabled people are disturbed by disability” (Michalko, 2009, p. 100). He resisted the “passive acquiescence to oppression” (Charlton, 2006, p. 222) that is assumed as normal. He used his voice, and owned his presence in social interactions. He challenged the assertion in the CMEC quote that low-literacy leads to a lack of self-confidence and isolation, he said, “Hey, I have always been confident, even when I was a kid. ‘Hi my name is’ and bam, we were friends. And you know me, if I see something is wrong, I think its wrong, I put my opinion in” (HA). He shared a story about writing a letter to the provincial premier about changes to the income support program for disabled adults. He said he wanted to tell the government that he appreciated that the premier kept her promise and “did the right thing”. HA’s story is an example of critical pedagogical work in basic literacy, where he learned to write his letter with his own words and from his own experience. He said, he was able to write his letter because his teacher “gave me questions and gave me ways to research to do that” (HA). Then he said, “I never thought I’d ever say this. These words would come out of my mouth. I love school.” HA said he always wanted to come back to school. He told us that he had tried to return to school as an
adult, but was advised against it by a psychiatrist. He said, “Years ago I went to a psychiatrist and he said it would be too frustrating for me to go back to school, so I never did.” But, he said he never gave up, even if others did not support him. It was a personal goal for him to finish school, and he said that he was proud of his determination. Education is a socio-historical location for the production of disability through the categorization and testing of different bodies (Erevelles, 2000; Gabel, 2009). Similarly, disability is treated as a category of exclusion in adult literacy policy and public discourse, (Gardner, 2010). In the OECD PIAAC survey people living with disability are relegated to a “missing category...[adults] not able to provide enough background information to impute proficiency scores because of...learning or mental disabilities” (OECD & Statistics Canada, 2013, p. 29).

As HA3 criticized the CMEC quote, others began to agree with him, rejecting the implication of causal relation between reading and writing and how they experience daily life. HA said, “It’s saying you can’t do anything because [of] literacy and that. But things happen, and reading don’t make a difference.” As the conversations continued about the quote from the CMEC report participants shared stories about their life experiences and began to question the implied life experiences of enduring detrimental effects of low literacy. They agreed that having difficulty with reading and writing can make some things more difficult like “going to the grocery and not being able to read the labels” (JA1); however most disagreed with the overall tone of pitiful life experiences and helplessness. One participant (SH) summed up the difference between the implied detrimental life experiences in the text and the actual life experiences in social arrangements of structured inequality by talking about “people being pretty racist and ranking people too harshly.” (SH)
While discussing the CMEC statement, another participant shared a story about her grandmother that illuminates the disconnection between the discursive narrative of deficit and people’s actual lives. RO grew up with her grandmother and family on a First Nations reservation. When she was old enough to drive she began to take her grandmother to the bank. RO described what happened when she realized that her grandmother did not know how to read and write (in English),

I used to go to the bank with her. I noticed when she would sign her cheques or sign her signature she would just sign with an X. So then I just finally asked her, and she said she couldn’t read or write. So it was, like, Oh! And I was like, why couldn’t you tell us [family]? And she said she felt embarrassed. I told her there was not reason to be. It’s alright to be embarrassed. And then she wasn’t. Then we were teaching her how to read, to sign her own name. She said she didn’t want to learn how to read, she just wanted to learn how to sign her name. (RO)

RO spoke lovingly of her grandmother and did not see her as socially isolated, or missing confidence or unable to communicate. Neither did she see her grandmother as lacking knowledge about things in her daily life. Her grandmother saying that she didn’t want to learn may seem to be problematic, however this is only a problem if one accepts the social norming of universal literacy.

The grandmothers’ stance of just wanting to learn how to write her name and not wanting to learn to read offered the focus group participants an opportunity to consider the social and historical roots of not learning to read. They discussed the colonization of Indigenous peoples on
Turtle Island (Simpson, 2008). There was recognition among the focus group participants, most of whom were Indigenous, that RO’s grandmother, in the context of her own life, probably did not need to take up this ‘colonizing’ expectation, and her resistance was seen as honourable. This conversation revealed the history of literacy as an instrument of colonization of Indigenous peoples in Canada (Aguir & Halseth, 2015; Battiste, 2013; Steeves, 2010; Simpson, 2008). The literate act of writing X as one’s signature points to histories of forced assimilation and colonial oppression. It also points to the present instruments of literacy, OECD and other standardized testing regimes, in which using an X as a signature represents failure of the technical literate task of signing one’s name and writing one’s self into legitimacy (Brandt, 2009; Mace 2012). The feeling of embarrassment experienced by RO’s grandmother is an example of what Bartlett (2007a) would call the internalization of racial colonialism as emotion–shaming. These moments of embarrassment are nuances of the Eurocentric concept of superiority of “literacy over orality” (Collins & Blot, 2006 p. 129), which individually and broadly disavow not only Indigenous knowledge and language, but all that is Indigenous (Aguir & Halseth, 2015; Simpson, 2008).

A number of Indigenous participants spoke about their own and their families’ experience with residential school. For Indigenous peoples the residential school system was overwhelmingly the location of knowing literacy. I am intentionally using the phrase ‘knowing literacy’ to point out the disciplinary power of the Eurocentric concept of literacy in what has been called by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) a “policy of cultural genocide” (p. 3). When another participant responded to the concept in the CMEC quote, of low literacy leading to social isolation, it was important for me as the researcher to understand that her response was in the
context of “accumulated and collective trauma” (Aguir & Halseth, 2015, p. 8) of colonization.

BE spoke about the impact of residential schooling on her and her family:

I was thinking, when I was younger I was always isolating myself. I didn’t want to be around anybody because I was in the boarding school, the residential school. Then in our house, there was probably about a dozen of my cousins and they were all together. And I didn’t like it. I was built my own way and wanted to be myself. It was stressful for me. I couldn’t concentrate. (BE)

I had previously worked with BE in an adult literacy class I taught, and I wrote in my reflective journal about meeting her when she started. She chose to work on her own and sat at a desk by the window that was quite separate from other learners in the class. After working together mostly through journaling and one-to-one conversations, BE initiated working together with other students and began to speak up during group work. I noted that she wrote a lot and worked hard at reading. She began reading out loud in group activities, and helped other learners in group reading activities. BE wrote a number of poems about her life; one was about her mother, another about “who I am”, and another called “Life with a learning disability”. She wrote a lot in her journal about reading and writing and about what she had experienced in her life. She was a very reflective writer and said that it helped her deal with the trauma she experienced as a child.

Most of the participants in the focus group expressed that they had experienced trauma in their lives. Horsman, (1999, 2006), a leading researcher on the impact of violence on learning, particularly women’s learning experiences in adult literacy, argues that it is reasonable to consider that nearly every learner in adult literacy programs has experienced trauma (Horsman, 1999). In order to recognize the impact of violence on learning Horsman points out the
importance of bringing into view “all forms of violence together” and states, “When I refer to violence, I want to encapsulate the complex interconnection of all types of violence and recognize the power of systemic violence to shame, silence and exclude” (Horsman, 2006, p. 180). She argues for addressing the impact of violence on learning in program practices and design. She calls for naming the normed violence of systemic oppression and for honouring learner’s knowledge and “experience of trauma and its impact on self” (Horsman, 2006, p. 182). She challenges educators to locate themselves in this context and consider their own experiences and knowledge of violence, and she confronts research and policy discourse that frames violence as an individual, isolated experience separate from educational and other institutional systems of oppression and colonialism.

I agree with Horsman’s statement that nearly every learner in adult literacy programs has experienced some kind of trauma. In my experience as a practitioner I understand that the impact of violence on learning is as central in adult literacy education as the mechanical and technical skills of reading and writing. It is also my experience that the technical-doing of reading and writing is inseparable from the emotional-doing of reading and writing, and feeling shame and fear are most often the predominant emotional blockages that learners experience, particularly when they begin in the basic literacy program. This was BE’s experience when she first started in the class. For weeks, she chose to sit separate from the other students, and work on her own by the window. She said she liked to look outside as it helped her to concentrate. BE’s memories of trauma were evoked when she entered the program. Most of the participants in the focus groups spoke about their prior school experiences that reflected different types of violence, and, as Horsman notes they were interconnected. One participant spoke about being humiliated by a
teacher because she could not read the clock in the classroom, “A teacher actually humiliated me in front of all these other students in the class. She said to me how come you can’t tell time? Well what kind of an answer can I give her if I just didn’t learn it.” (JU) JU said that she spent a lot of time in school trying to be quiet and trying to pay attention. She remembers: “Teachers in elementary, they would snap, so I stopped asking questions.” (JU). She said, “there are a lot of gaps in my education” and she decided to come back to school to improve her spelling and reading. JU also said that she really wanted to “understand things better and be understood”. Feeling emotionally safe in the classroom that would allow her to concentrate on spelling and reading was what she lost when she was young.

Meanwhile, there is remarkably little attention given to the impact of violence and trauma on learning in the policy and public discourse on adult literacy. Aside from Horsman and other, mostly practitioner-researchers (Battell, et al., 2008; Norton, 2004), the recognition of the profound impact of trauma and violence on learners and the process of learning is mostly missing in the literature. Perhaps to some extent, some practitioners prefer to avoid it themselves because the topic may be uncomfortable and shame-filled, and may trigger traumatic feelings (Horsman, 1999; Walker, 2017). As a survivor of abuse, I am acutely aware of this, and have learned that my coming to terms with my own history of trauma is a source of strength I can draw upon in my teaching practice. This includes creating a climate in the classroom that acknowledges that people do experience violence and trauma “but declares violence unacceptable.” (Horsman, 1999, p. 298) in order to support learners to more fully engage in their own learning process.
The impact of violence and trauma on learning is also not addressed or considered in the OECD measurement regime, it is obscured in the narrative of “the detrimental effects of low literacy” (Blunt & Faris, 2006, p. 8). For example, the OECD literacy assessments claim that the social outcomes of low literacy include poor health, poor self-management, social isolation, and less likely to trust others or volunteer (OECD, 2013). These authoritative texts, however inadequate, become publicly perceived sources of statistical evidence of the low-literate figure: the deficit character. Circulating in the deficit ‘skills’ discourse the multitude of such texts construct images of the low literate character. Through the “practices of number-making” (Gorur, 2015, p. 13) these texts reframe the social and political production of systemic injustices and violence and deny peoples’ life histories and experiences of trauma.

Immigrant learners are also often an integral but frequently ignored part of this picture. Many basic adult literacy programs have immigrant learners who are most often women and refugees and in my experience, most practitioners acknowledge that many such learners more than likely have a history of trauma and loss. But their life experiences are also obscured by prevailing discourse focused on skills deficits. This relationship is further complicated, since the mid nineties by changes in immigration policies that have increasingly required higher levels of education to qualify to immigrate. Some recent immigrants are indeed seeking literacy learning, but others are literate in their first language and want to learn English. In their study on literacy learners’ perspective on progress Jackson and Schaetti (2014) note that there were significant number of immigrant learners in literacy programs and many “did not perceive of themselves primarily as literacy learners; they thought of themselves as language learners.” (p. 31). A participant in one of my research focus groups expressed his surprise at being placed in a literacy
program even though he wanted to enroll in an English language class, “When they told me I had to go to the literacy [class], I said what? No, I cannot do that because I’m not in that level even. I’ve already passed that level.” (MA) He felt that his prior education was being disregarded and he felt humiliated by the assessment procedure he experienced. MA’s experience reflects the local impact of immigration and language policies. So, both individual learners and literacy programs are being impacted by shifting immigration policies operationalized by transnational literacy and language assessment measures. Gibb (2015), Goldberg (2012), Jackson (2005), and other scholars have critiqued the “skills shortage discourse” (Goldberg, 2012, p. 126) that treats immigrants and refugees as measurable commodities, where their sense of “belonging and participating in their adopted home is based on their labor market attachment.” (p. 58). These policies hold up images of the ideal ‘Canadian’ worker, and in turn the ideal citizen, burying the power of shaming and social and political “arrangements that produce racialized and classed educational categories of people” (Bartlett, 2007a, p. 559).

4.5 Writing up the deficit character

When adults join literacy programs, they enter already profiled by distant surveying narratives that indeed take no account of the actual effect on individual lives of systemic inequalities or histories of colonial oppression. In the measurement regime, the image of the deficit subject is reconstructed as the un/low-skilled worker in a globalized knowledge economy with its imagined ‘knowledge worker’ positioned at the ghostly centre (Graham and Slee, 2008). I argue that these representations construct a sanitized version of the underlying shaming narrative of the illiterate body that has “become buried within current technological and functional imaginings of literacy” (Hamilton, 2012, p. 29). In the numerous publications of the OECD and Statistics Canada and
other documents by expert think tanks and institutions like CMEC, the issue of shaming is rarely acknowledged. It may show up only as another personal deficit to be overcome, but in that way the shaming is compounded. To point out the power of such texts, I return to my research focus groups where one participant questioned her feelings about being literate after reading the selected excerpts from the three publications. She said,

I think I am an average student. My reading and writing skills are somewhat up to par, but I do struggle with remembering how to spell some words. I don’t think that I am illiterate … but I don’t know … after listening to these [reports] I am wondering if in fact I may be. (RO)

I was surprised when RO said this. She is an Indigenous woman who had returned to school to get her high school diploma after nearly fifteen years. She had originally left school shortly after starting high school for reasons other than academic. RO talked about doing well at school when she was young. RO’s response fit neatly into the deficit discourse in that moment of internalizing a narrative that was not her own. There was a visible expression of shame as she considered this conflicting ‘evidence’ telling her that she was less competent in her reading and writing than she had believed herself to be. I also felt shame, but more anger with what feels like a conundrum of embedded (normalized) colonizing power structures. We spoke about whose knowledge counts: Eurocentric-designed distant surveys, or RO’s lived experience and embodied knowledge. At that moment there were no easy answers.

The trouble with this persistent discourse of deficit is that they silence the voice of the subject and witness alike. As a normalizing project of ‘literacy as numbers’ I’ve come to understand how the measurement regime of such international assessment projects needs the deficit character. It
over-writes the layers of learners’ lived experiences and resoundingly disavows their embodied knowledge, reducing them to calculable characteristics and creating the character of deficit. In order to speak to this silencing I have accepted Disability Studies scholar Michalko’s (2009) invitation to “think with disability in its making” (p. 66), to interrogate the constructed ‘normalcy’s’ need for the dis-abled body to prop up the idealized ‘normal’ body, as a way to learn how to ‘think with literacy in its making’ in order to deconstruct the statistically invented deficit character.

In this chapter I have aimed to ‘think with literacy in its making’ to begin to examine the norming practices of measuring those “characteristics of the deficits of the low skilled population.” (OECD & Statistics Canada, 2011, p. 309). I began to see how to link those disconnections between the learners embodied knowledge and those distant surveys and policy discourse. I was able to use the Disability Studies ways of interrogating language, which is how I came to see in chapter 3, the re-making of what adult literacy is and what adult literacy education is made to be in the dominant discourse of the measurement regime. In this chapter I came to see this work of measuring as the doing that produces the learner as deficit character. Finally, I have realized that it is in the embodied ways of knowing that these disconnections are the most profound, which I explore in the next chapter.
Chapter 5
Learning begins in the body

5.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the significance of paying attention to the embodied knowledge of learners in the context of power relations. I turn to the participants in my research to consider embodied knowing, learning and relationship throughout the chapter. First I draw on considerations of the concept of ‘embodied knowledge’ used by scholars in adult education, the humanities, fine arts and health, including Horsman’s (2006) important investigations of violence, trauma and shame. Then I suggest using story as a way to explore how emotion is persuasively present in the literate act and in the learning process of reading and writing. I examine the significance of relationship in learning and knowing, particularly language and power in learner and educator relationship (Tett & Maclachlan, 2008). I look at ways to disrupt norming practices of literacy shaming by paying attention to nuances in language usage (Bartlett, 2007a). I then turn to consider the social and political positioning of reading over writing as a form of social ordering, and how this continues today in the measurement regime of international assessments (Atkinson, 2013a; Brandt, 2009). I draw on Freire (1991) and New Literacy Studies scholars to explore power in writing and authorship (Brandt, 2009; Burgess 2012a; Mace, 1992, 2012). I conclude this chapter

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3 As I discussed in Chapter 2, there were three focus groups with thirteen participants in total. All focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed. There were eight women and five men and their age ranged from early twenties to mid fifties. Eight participants stated they were Aboriginal or Métis, five said they had a disability (physical, learning, developmental). Two participants said they had immigrated to Canada. (See page 48 for full description of the focus groups)
by arguing that learning to write is one way of resisting the normalization of the deficit-literate character.

### 5.2 Embodied knowledge

I want to begin this chapter with returning again to think about bodies in basic literacy programs. Specifically, to think about the body inside, that is emotion and feelings, to listen viscerally to learners about how they feel about themselves. Listening closely to what learners have to say requires paying attention to what scholars in adult education, the humanities, fine arts and health describe as ‘embodied knowledge’ (Butterwick & Selman, 2012; Dirkx, 2008, 2001; Freiler, 2008; Lipson-Lawrence, 2012; Miller & King, 2011; Nieves, 2012). Freiler (2008) suggests embodiment as a way to construct knowing “through direct engagement in bodily experiences and inhabiting one’s body through a felt sense of being-in-the-world.” (p. 40). Embodied knowledge is emotion and feeling that often seem to be beyond words; Swartz (2012) calls this “unlanguaged embodied knowing” (p. 17) and Lipson-Lawrence (2012) describes it as “intuitive knowing” (p. 5). From my experience in paying attention to emotion and sensibilities, I argue that descriptions and definitions of embodied knowledge will always be incomplete because language cannot fully capture how people know and feel. Rather than trying to describe embodied knowledge Nieves (2012) asks, “What if knowledge is an energy force?....that can live and manifest itself in the cells of our bodies” (p.33). Nieves’ question challenges the dominant neo-positivist claim that knowledge is empirical and objective (Belzer & St. Clair, 2005) and resists neo-liberal concepts of knowledge as commodity and society as a knowledge economy enterprise (Atkinson 2012; Brandt, 2001; Darville, 1999; Roberts, 2000; Tett, 2014; Walker & Rubenson, 2014).
For the purpose of this study ‘embodied knowledge’ is better explained through story than through description or definition. I will attempt to explain how one short sentence in Butterwick and Selman’s (2012) article on “Embodied knowledge and decolonization” fell to the bottom of my gut and sent a wave of shock throughout my body. When I read, “Unremembered memories are held in the body.” (Butterwick & Selman, 2012, p. 64), I immediately sensed a visceral reaction but in that moment I had no words for what I was feeling. I re-read the sentence over and over again not to make sense of the words as they were written, but intuitively I knew that there was something else happening. Eventually I could see that two things were happening. One was that I was very conscious of being in the act of reading; and the other was that I was having a strong emotional reaction as my body was making meaning of the content of that short sentence. I was conscious of my ability to know the mechanics of reading the written language, which allowed me to get right to the act of comprehension. This is when I felt the thud of those words hit the bottom of my gut. Before describing how my gut comprehended these words, I want to first explain how my unremembered memories of achieving fluidity of reading, how those technical and mechanical skills such as decoding, word recognition, automaticity and syntactic cues (Campbell, 2003), are internally activated every time I read. My body remembers how to do this even though I do not consciously remember the exact moments when I experienced those cognitive shifts from struggling with the mechanics of reading one word after another to being able to read fluently. When I teach reading with learners I describe the process of moving from a deliberate effort of reading each word to reading with greater ease as when reading ‘gets in your bones’. I also recognize that reading fluently cannot be viewed in a standardized way for everyone; instead what I mean is a fluency of reading that feels right by
each individual reader. It is the moment when the reader’s attention moves from a conscious
effort with getting the mechanics of reading the words plus comprehending the content of the
printed texts to a simultaneity of doing both. This is the same for learning to write. The
difference in the second moment is that much of the technicalities of reading the word is now in
your bones leaving more room for comprehension of the content of the text (Campbell, 2003).
This brings me back to the second, harder thing that happened when I read, “Unremembered
memories are held in the body.” (Butterwick & Selman, 2012, p. 64).

Comprehension relies on meaning making, which is reading with multiple senses, bringing one’s
embodied knowledge in relation with the text to make sense of the writer’s intent. In this
sensory-laden interaction of the writers’ words and the readers’ bodily knowing, comprehension
occurs. My embodied knowledge made meaning of that sentence by reaching deep into my
submerged memories of trauma. I knew this as I felt it brush against my consciousness and
disrupt my intentional learning. In her studies on the impact of violence on learning Horsman
(2006) describes these moments as “struggling to stay ‘present’” (p. 183). As I read Butterwick
and Selman’s (2012) article on using somatic theatre approaches in adult education as a way to
resist the dominant colonization of women’s bodies and of Indigenous peoples that brief
sentence ‘hit a nerve’. It triggered memories of my childhood experience of abuse, and although
that violence did not happen at school it greatly impacted my learning in the classroom. For me
reading and writing was not easy to begin with but it became harder after the abuse started. I
remember finding it difficult to stay focused on the lessons in class. I believed the school report
cards and the teachers’ comments that it was my fault that I did not try hard enough, that I was
lazy in class, and that I should pay better attention. For most of my life I did not make the
connection between being abused and how it profoundly influenced my self-identity as a below-average student.

Horsman (1999) states, “Experiencing trauma as a child may well have contributed to difficulties with learning to read in the first place” (p. 35). This was true for me and I have also found it to be true for the majority of adult literacy learners I have worked with over the years. What is significant about Horsman’s extensive research on the impact of violence particularly on women’s learning is that it brings to the forefront taboo subjects that have largely been ignored in the educational domain. She argues that trauma – the impact of violence – shows up in the classroom in the bodies of learners, (and educators). In her work with numerous adult literacy educators Horsman (1999) has found that consistently they state that almost every learner in their programs has “experienced major trauma” (p. 35). She argues that it is imperative for programs to have classroom practices that support learners to feel more present in the learning process, including those internalized feelings of shame and sense of self. She explains, “Bringing more of the self to learning means that more of the self can be hurt and more can be available to assist learning, increasing both the danger and the value of being present in the learning environment” (Horsman, 2006, p. 185). I understand this to mean that for many people learning requires risk and vulnerability, which subconsciously can feel dangerously close to those internalized emotions of trauma-induced fear (Perry, 2006). Horsman (2006) points out the importance of resisting pathologizing trauma and violence as an individual problem, instead she argues that educators can address systemic violence and discrimination.
Many learners I worked with expressed feelings of fear. One participant in my research focus groups had missed a lot of school when he was young, he said, “I was so afraid to let people know that I can’t read. And I can’t write. I always feared.” (DA). Another learner spoke about the intergenerational impact of residential school in her family. She described her feelings of being anxious especially when she was young, she said, “I would get hypersensitive and couldn’t concentrate, and I didn’t want to be around anybody” (BE). Both learners also spoke about their experiences in adult literacy programs. They said that they felt accepted by their instructor and other learners, which helped them to take risks like reading out loud and letting others read their writing.

This brings me back to the issue of the need for educators to pay attention to the different ways in which learners express how they feel when they are consciously learning the mechanics of reading and writing. This involves educators listening for spoken and unspoken expressions by learners, and for educators to reflect on their own feelings and interpretations and assumptions about emotions (Dirkx, 2008; Horsman, 1999; Kornelsen, 2006). Learners join basic literacy programs for various reasons along with a shared desire to improve those technical and mechanical skills of literacy (Barton, 2009; Ramdeholl, 2011; Reder, 2009). They rely on their embodied knowledge to comprehend and make meaning of small steps like how to make a word appear by writing it, or how to see and hear the sound of each syllable. Learning basic literacy is a process of learning how to be in relationship with language, particularly having a sense – feelings – of having more power in relation with language through the process of learning the mechanics of reading and writing. As the mechanics of reading and writing become more automatic, the learner’s relational power with text shifts. With greater ease of reading and
writing the word, learners experience greater emotional authority – confidence – with language in the form of written text (Mace, 1992). These nuanced relational shifts between learners and text are experienced as changes in one’s sense of self and relations with others; and, noticing these changes are moments of self-assessment (Looney, 2008; Tett & Maclachlan, 2007). One participant in my research focus groups described her sense of improvement with sharing the following short story; but the words “I feel good” point to a profound shift in her sense of her own power: “I’m at McDonald’s by my place and I meet another friend. I feel good now I’m reading my horoscope and stuff.” (DN) She told a story about her friendship and how reading the horoscope in the newspaper is a joyful thing they now do when they get together. DN also said that she did not like the thought of coming back to school because she didn’t want to have to sit still and be quiet. This was her embodied memory of what it meant to be in school. She said her tutor helped her to realize that she could learn ‘out-loud’ by using a “talking computer that talks to you and is really fun” (DN). Embodied knowledge is recognition of the value of emotion and life experience in people’s lived histories, including past, present and “imagined futures” (Barton, 2009, p. 59), and how power is moved by emotion and language in social interactions (Hamilton, 2012).

5.3 Learning in relationship

Learners bring their personal lived histories, including experiences of trauma and violence to the present context of intentional learning, and so do practitioners. As I have shown with my story of reading Butterwick and Selman (2012), practitioners also bring their personal lived-histories into the classroom. However, their memories of prior experiences of schooling and writing and reading are filtered through an accumulation of literacy achievement granting them a feeling of
greater power and authority over text. The relationship between learner and practitioner is partly constructed by how they each feel about their own relationship with written text and their sense of self as being literate (Titchkosky, 2008a). Paying attention to this emotional presence makes obvious how power in social relations and language is held and withheld, taken and given (Bartlett, 2007b; Burgess, 2012a; Lange, Chovanec, Cardinal, Kajner & Acuana, 2015; Tett & Maclachlan, 2007).

A research in practice project in Ontario called: *What goes on here: A study of the student-practitioner relationship* (Zimmerman, 2004), found that respecting emotion was significant in practitioner and learner relationships. The researcher-practitioners that were involved in the project describe their connection with learners as having, “a certain rapport…involving sensitivity, responsiveness, attentiveness, acceptance, trust and expectations.” (p. 11). This ‘certain rapport’ honours the emotional presence of vulnerability in the process of learning (Horsman, 1999; Miller & King, 2011). Zimmerman states that the practitioners in the project refer to their rapport with learners as occurring intuitively, and that they “cannot explain [it] rationally” (Zimmerman, 2004, p. 12) but see it as guiding their decision-making when they consider what to do in a teaching-learning moment. They state that they know their “grab bag of skills needs a selection process and it is…this process that seems to rely upon our intuition” (p. 12). This exploratory and reflective practitioner-driven study points out two important aspects. One is the significance of emotion in learning, and the other is the significance of relationship in learning and knowing. Being able to see and value emotion in learning requires paying attention in ways that may make practitioners feel vulnerable. Some practitioners may not be comfortable with paying attention to learners, and their own, emotions, and to be able to notice how feelings
help (and hinder) engagement in learning. Horsman (1999) calls for this type of courageous teaching that invites learners and their whole emotional selves to be present in those learning moments that may trigger memories of trauma and loss. Learners bring their whole bodily self to the learning context and learning happens through relationships, and much of the relationship between learner and educator is made up of emotion (Battell, Gesser, Rose, Sawyer & Twiss, 2004; Horsman, 1999; Lefebvre et al., 2006; Jackson & Schaetti, 2014). Zimmerman, (2004) and the other practitioner-researchers point out that the ‘certain rapport’ offers a trusting space that honours those vulnerable moments in taking risks for learning.

Honouring the risks that a person has taken when deciding to join a literacy program is one way of establishing a ‘certain rapport’ with learners right at the very beginning. It is one way to respectfully acknowledge the feelings inside the rational reasons for coming back to school. Returning after years and possibly decades, adults tend to carry with them their childhood memories of schooling into their new classroom. Most learners know they are returning to a level of education that they failed to acquire the first-time round. Their reasons for returning to school include the unspoken desire to overcome feelings of internalized shame (Walker, 2017). To explain what I mean by acknowledging learners’ feelings inside their expressed reasons for joining a class I will describe the initial assessment process I used when I worked in a part-time basic literacy program at the college in Calgary, Alberta.

When I met new learners at the classroom door, it was my job to facilitate a dignified process for them getting started as a learner. After inviting the learner to choose to sit where they want, we then began the initial assessment with an informal conversation. I try to give both small hints and
obvious signs that people don’t have to re-tell what they lack (literacy) as the starting place. My job as educator is to resist the trope of ‘lacking’ coming into the conversation in normalizing ways. I need to listen to what the learner is saying with words and body, and be mindful of my own embodied words in our first-impression conversation. I will describe the process of this in-class initial assessment to try point out some of the subtle ways of establishing a ‘certain rapport’.

Meeting the new learner who has arrived at the class, we sit down at a table, then after taking a few minutes to talk I bring a sheet of lined paper forward and ask: Do you mind writing your name and address? The introduction of pencil and paper, and a pen nearby, is an offering for our first act of reading and writing together. This is a delicate moment where there is risk for the learner and opportunity for me to learn about how they feel about writing as well as how they write. The risk is writing in front of another person, and difficulty with doing so is mostly likely the very reason why the individual has come to the class. First, some learners will write their name and then their home address. Most learners will print their name and some will hesitate when they go to write their address. Sometimes they will bring out an identification card like a driver’s license to copy the address and sometimes they bring out a carried piece of paper. How people write their address will tell me a lot about their relationship with writing. Can they write their address from memory, or are they copying the address because they don’t know how to spell some words, or to write the entire address? I can also get a sense of how they are feeling when doing this. Sometimes I offer to write the address if the learner indicates that they don’t want to write it. I then read aloud the address and we talk casually about where they live, their neighbourhood, how far they travelled to come to the class. This ‘name and address’ moment
tells me a lot about the relationship between literacy and the learner. The carried memories of the meanings of literacy show up this early in our new relationship and my attention to the language of the body is critical. How does it feel to bring oneself into a schooling environment, perhaps for the first time in a very long time? How does it feel to write in front of someone else? The internalized discourse of deficit may be bringing up fear about how, and whether, the pencil is held and how each letter is written on the page. There may be fear of reliving old messages about being a poor or messy writer, having bad penmanship, or not being able to spell.

Next, as I bring in the formal document, the registration form to be completed, then obvious and not so obvious hints of carried meanings of embodied (il)literacy can also become apparent. Sometimes I offer to be the scribe and we go through the form together. Working through filling out this form is our first collaborative writing and reading together on a formal document. I want to look at power in this interaction with this new type of textual object that requires the learner’s attention and engagement. Compared to the lined piece of paper the registration form can be seen as an object of greater power. Unlike the lined paper this ‘official’ piece of paper represents its owner, the college, and for the learner it most probably has an institutional feel to it. Fawns and Ivanič (2001) argue that the form-filling is regulating power and “people often feel disempowered by the requirement of filling them out.” (p. 80). Filling in this and other forms constrains the learner’s identity to that which is written (filled in). The learner is held accountable for the content of the form as indicated by their required signature. Although form-filling is perceived as a routine event in everyday – normal – life, it is in these everyday moments that the unspoken presence of literacy shaming emerges and the learner’s feeling and social status are compressed into a literate performance. As educator, it is my job in these
moments to notice the appearance of literacy shaming and to disrupt it from “the place of normalcy” (Michalko, 2009, p. 69). Disruption begins with noticing, and then wondering about feelings and the ways in which language is used in relations.

A second form is required in the initial assessment: the learning goals form. It is required by the program funder and is viewed as normal in an “audit culture placing increasing importance upon mandatory processes of accountability and reporting” (Varey & Tusting, 2012, p. 105). The literate performance of filling in this form is approached in the same way as the registration form. I explain that learning goals can change over the time the learner is in the class. But learning goals are increasingly dictated by policy and funder accountability agenda (Burgess, 2008; Hamilton, 2009; Jackson & Schaetti, 2014). Many practitioners in basic literacy programs in Canada have had to create “workarounds” (Smythe, 2015, p. 4) in order to push back against neoliberal accountability and reporting impositions on programs and learners (Atkinson, 2015; Crooks, et al, 2008; Horsman & Woodrow, 2006; Pinsent-Johnson, 2015). Most of the participants in my research focus groups were in programs with funder-determined goals. Many literacy practitioners are skilled in mediating the disparate rules in order to support learners to state their learning goals in their own words.

Participants in the focus groups shared their views about how they feel about the requirement of setting goals. One participant had moved from one program where learners could self-determine their goals to a more structured program with a selection of pre-set goals. She had difficulty conforming to the imposed requirements that felt directly opposite to her own learning goals. BE said, “Then you go there and you have to learn about that or something and no, you want to learn
something else.” Another participant talked about feeling obliged to agree to the pre-set goals when she started her program. After a few weeks into the program she wanted to revise her goals. JA said that when she asked her instructor to change her goals she felt self-conscious, “like it makes you feel like you failed” (JA). What was significant for JA and BE is that even though what they wanted to learn and the wording of the goals may have seemed quite similar to the instructor, the use of language in the pre-set goals was not the learners’ own way of saying it. The pre-set goals used institutional language that carried the power of the institution, which made the participants feel that they were not in charge of their learning process. Some participants said they their reason for returning school was not reflected in what seemed to be prearranged expectations of their performance. JA stated that her instructors helped her to revise her goal, which was most likely based on her instructors ability to worked-around the policy interests embedded in institutional accountability systems. Some participants talked about feeling supported to change their goal over time, which made them feel that goal setting was helpful in their learning process. They said that they viewed this approach to making goals as stepping-stones of their achievements of their own learning.

Now, to return to the initial assessment process I used in the part-time basic literacy program, the last step of the initial assessment was to begin the written conversation between me and the learner by making a learner’s journal. This was a simple duo-tang with lined paper, and I began by writing the date and a few sentences:

Dear ____, Welcome to (the class). I am very glad you decided to come. This notebook is yours to keep. You can write what you want to write here, and every week I will write to you and I hope you will write back. I originally grew up in
Scotland, but have lived here in Canada for a long time. I like living here. What do you like about living here in Calgary?

I then read out loud and we would read together, and then we would go from there. The journal is a central curriculum tool. As an educator it is important that the journal is introduced with humility and respect; this is a textual act of building mutual trust (Freire, 2011). This open-ended written ‘hello and welcome to the class’ is a recognition of the risk-taking feelings in deciding and returning to school. Barton (1994) states, “language mediates our experience, and written texts can do this in a powerful way” (p. 66). Beginning our relationship with a written form of communicating brings together the “three important facets of literacy” (Tett, 2010, p. 57): talking, reading and writing, and the bodily emotions and sensibilities that carry all three facets. The embodied sense of how one feels about their ability to read and write carries both barriers and potential for learning to happen. My role is to support learners to open themselves up in literacy moments to change those internalized messages of failure and shame. The informal initial assessment that occurs while welcoming and settling new learners into the class is both the first learning experience and a first impression about how learning can be different from the perhaps long-held sense of failure from prior schooling experiences.

In the initial assessment, there are a number of things happening between an educator and a new learner. Establishing a respectful relationship right at the beginning can challenge dominant socially arranged power dynamics between the practitioner and learner (Battell, Gesser, Rose, Sawyer & Twiss, 2004). However, even seemingly respectful interactions may not disrupt the normalized roles of ‘teacher and learner’. In their study on power in tutor-learner relationships, Tett and Maclachlan (2008) point out that the dominant deficit model in adult literacy reinforces
a “discourse of maternal protectionism” (p. 407). They found that learners enter programs as “marked unequals … positioned in the power hierarchies even lower than the ‘normal’ adult learner” (p.406). The tendency to view learners as weak or child-like undermines the learner and the learner-practitioner relationship (Belzer & Pickard, 2015; Mace, 1992). In More Powerful Literacies, Tett, Hamilton & Crowther, (2012) argue that to make power more visible learners should be positioned “as politically and socially more equal” (p. 5). In my teaching experience, I understood that questioning power is my responsibility. Being mindful of how power is carried out through language about literacy affects the ways in which I engage, instruct and make judgments. Power also influences how learners engage, learn and make judgments. The sharing of reading and writing of those texts in the initial assessment is a small but significant exchange of dignity and respect by disrupting, to some degree, the established power imbalances in relationships between learner, educator and written text.

5.4 Writing and power

I want to now consider a topic that has been very popular amongst community basic literacy practitioners for more than three decades: how writing can be a way to investigate and to shift power, emotion, authorship and learner identity (Brandt, 2009; Burgess, 2012a; Burgess & Ivanič, 2010; Darville, 1989; Mace, 1992; Morgan, 1997). In order to consider the social location of writing in relation to power, emotion, authorship and identity I need to first start by looking at how pervasive narratives on literacy routinely position reading ahead of writing. When talking about literacy we say ‘reading and writing’ more often than ‘writing and reading’. The ordering of these terms signifies that reading is more socially powerful, more valued than writing. Mace (1992) notes that the “popular and institutional view of literacy is having, most of all, to do with
reading” (p. xvi). Brandt (2009) points out that most mass literacy campaigns have been reading campaigns. In the dominant measurement discourse of the OECD literacy assessment projects, individual adults must be able to write to be able to take the test. Although the OECD and invested governments claim the surveys are an assessment of literacy skills, implying both reading and writing, the IALS tests do not assess writing. The OECD measurement regime obscures the mechanistic reconstruction of reading as the subject of literacy testing and subsumes writing as an invisible gatekeeper to the test. I argue that how writing, and reading, are re-constructed in such regimes is a modern version of historical periods of governing adult literacy education as a form of social ordering (Darville, 2011; Davis, 2002).

Early in my dissertation research I read Daniel Coleman’s (2008) *White Civility: The Literary Project of English Canada*. Reading this book, I was strongly reminded of Brandt’s (2009) encouragement to look historically at how social constructs of the meaning and value of literacy are produced. Coleman examines the socially conforming influences of reading popular culture texts (newspapers, novels, pamphlets) between 1850 and 1950 on colonizing settlers, immigrants, and ultimately the colonization of the Indigenous peoples in Canada. He suggests that these types of mass print literacy contributed to a construction of “White normativity [as] White English Canadian privilege” (Coleman, 2008, p. 3). Coleman argues that these mass-produced texts,

[…] enabled unrelated groups to *read* the same narrative and become acquainted with the same information, which provided collective imagination necessary for national consciousness. This project of literacy-fed, shared imagination, accordingly, is ubiquitous in early Canadian comments about the building [of] a
civil society in British North America. (Coleman, 2008, p. 34). (Italics my emphasis)

Coleman’s description of the use of such texts for governance through popular imaginings of white normativity reinforced colonialist ideologies of Eurocentric civility and morality (Collins and Blot, 2003; Davis, 1995, 2002; Graff, 2013, McLaren, 1990). Brandt (2009) explains the underlying significance of such representations of literate-as-reading and describes the relative social positioning of reading vs writing. She states, “… in the moral universe of reading, writing holds a lesser status” (p. 57), and goes on to say that historically reading was seen as a social virtue, compared to writing which was viewed as “good to the extent that it demonstrates what reading teaches: rule abiding conduct.” (Brandt, 2009, pp. 57-58). Brandt (2009) points out that in nineteenth century America the literate powers (church, landowners, government) understood that in their society “readers would be many and writers would be few” (p. 70). According to these social rules the act of writing was viewed as not a “suitable vehicle for religious or social control, and especially dangerous in the hands of the oppressed.” (p. 56).

Applying these same ideas in the twentieth century, teaching the oppressed to write was Freire’s (1998) critical pedagogical argument for adult literacy. He challenged normative constructs of adult basic education noting, “one of the important aspects of adult literacy work is the [learners’] development of the capacity for expression.” (Freire, 1998, p. 496). In his speech at the 1981 Brazilian Congress of Reading in Campinas, Brazil, Freire (1991) expressed his thesis on the social transformative power of literacy, he said,

[… ] reading the word is not proceeded merely by reading the world, but by a certain form of writing it, or re-writing it, that is, of transforming it by means of
conscious practical work. For me this dynamic movement is central to the literacy process. (1991, p. 144) [italics in the original]

I include this quote as a reminder to myself of the fuller meaning of Freire’s well-known, and often co-opted phrase: “Reading the word and the world” (Freire & Macedo, 1987). What is sometimes lost in this shortened idiom is that learning to read and write is a – dynamic – socio-political creative process that is centred upon the learner’s knowledge and cultural reality.

Freire’s literacy programs were modeled upon the learners’ “right of self-expression” (Freire, 1998, p. 486). These literacy programs used de-codification and co-creation of words and problem posing methods that emerged through learner’s “social reality, vocabulary and experience” (Schugurensky, 2011 p. 58). Through dialogue and mutual trust with the educator and each other, learners were supported to create their own written texts. Using the program’s “popular culture notebooks” (Freire, 1981, p. 29) and in relation with others, learners would “practice to learn” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 46) by writing the word(s) and the world as they read it, in their own voice and as a creative act (Freire, 1981, 1991). Unlike the dominant deficit discourse that artificially separates writing from reading, I see Freire’s argument as valuing the learner as a whole person who makes and re-makes meaning, literally through creating their own text and dialogically in conversations with others in and of the world. As a practitioner, I see the importance of taking Freire’s notion of creating text quite literally because it brings to the forefront what writing is doing in the doing of learning. Freire’s idea of becoming literate through conscious practical work and dynamic movement has strongly influenced my argument to recognize the value of learners’ embodied knowledge in critical pedagogical practice.
I will now turn again to the participants in my research focus groups to show how the practice of writing happens in dynamic movement with reading. I asked the participants in the focus group if they would be willing to write their response to the last question and give their writing to me for my research. They agreed. The last question was: How do you see yourself as a learner? I suggested to the participants that they could begin their answer with: I feel, I see, I think, I am, and I reassured them that any other way they chose to answer was also fine. Before beginning to write I told the participants that anyone who wanted to could read out-loud what they wrote. One participant, SH, wrote that she wanted “more learning to be up there [in the upgrading program].” After she finished writing she chose to read out loud what she wrote, and then she continued talking. She referred to an earlier conversation in the focus group where participants shared their views on learning and how they understood learning for themselves and others. She reminded us that she had described learning as a puzzle. She said,

Learning is like a puzzle. You learn one thing then from what you’ve learned you get ideas and bring in another piece into your life, and then another. And it’s some kind of puzzle that’s never going to be finished. But with each piece that interlocks … well … you have the satisfaction. That way that you can go on and look for that other piece and do the same thing. (SH)

I asked SH if she saw herself finding pieces for her puzzle of learning. She smiled, and said, “Yes”. Then she stopped talking and went back to writing. She wrote, “I learn one piece then another piece and another” (SH). She then read this aloud with a stronger sense of presence than her first piece of writing. In this moment SH was moving back and forth between writing, speaking, listening and interacting with me and the other participants. As she did this SH was authoring and articulating her embodied knowledge about self and learning. With the shifting of
her words, there was a shifting of power and there was a change in her voice tone and energy.

SH began with silently writing ‘I need to be up there’, then she read this out loud, and then she continued talking; she said ‘learning is like a puzzle, you learn one thing…’, then, she went back to silent writing and then read aloud, ‘I learn…’. Prompted by the focus group question: How do you see yourself as learner, and then reflecting through a dialogical relationship with the group I propose that SH was doing the conscious practical work that makes up what Freire (1998) describes as the process of literacy learning. With her expressed vocabulary and sense of self, and sense of the world, SH was shifting (transforming) from embodied deficit shaming (I need…) to affirmative presence of self (I learn…).

In basic literacy programs, many practitioners report that the act of writing is a powerful experience for learners (Lefebvre et. al, 2006; Morgan, 1997, 2000). These practitioners understand that as a social practice the process of learning to write involves creating a vocabulary of curiosity, critical thinking and reflection (Freire, 2011; Tett, 2010). Writing for learners is a powerful act in challenging their internalized shame. Walker (2016) states, “Often we find at the core of those entering adult basic education a corrosive shame” (p. 308). Placing the control of learning to write in the hands of learners encourages what Barton (1994) calls “critical language awareness…[that]…raises questions about the controls of language, power relations and the accessibility of information.” (p. 215). In my teaching experiences most of the learners I worked with viewed their writing as evidence of two significant aspects they came to see in themselves: one, the value of their own embodied knowledge and ways of expression; and, secondly their achievement of the mechanics of reading and writing. They wrote about things that were important to them in their lives. Over time, and with the practice of learning to write
learners began to feel differently about themselves. In both Canada and the UK, confidence is the most consistent change reported by learners in basic literacy programs (Jackson & Schaetti, 2014; Tett & Maclachlan, 2007). When learners state that they have more confidence in themselves, I argue that much of it is due to their greater capacity for (written) expression. Participants in my research focus groups shared how they feel about themselves since they began in their program. MA said, “I’m happy to be here where I am today, and LU joined in and said, “Yeah, it’s been good, I’m writing better now”.

Burgess and Ivanič (2010) state that “writing is an act of identity” (p.228), and other adult literacy scholars agree that learners experience a sense of authorship when they have control over what they write (Barton, 1994; Burgess, 2012a; Crowther & Tett, 2010; Hamilton, 2012; Ramdeholl, 2011). Mace (1992) argues, “Literacy education means persuading students that they are writers as well as readers, that they have an entitlement to be read, as well as to read others” (p. xvii). While many basic literacy practitioners, myself included, fully agree with and enact these critical pedagogical views, writing as it is constructed by those who hold authorship in the dominant deficit discourse is perceived as doing something entirely different. They are not interested in learners having control over what to write. Through their persuasive influence on naming the skills needed for employment and labour markets those distant authors of the literacy measurement regime determine what will count as writing and how it will be performed. This reduces writing to test taking and workplace performances, suppressing the act of writing to be in servitude of reading as reading is treated as a more controllable social scheme. In this regime the act of writing as a ‘right of expression’ and learning as embodied process is disavowed.
In the constructed technologies of OECD-type standardized assessments learning as embodied is erased, writing is subsumed under reading, and reading is conflated as literacy and simultaneously constricted as skill. How writing and reading are re-constructed in these current globalized regimes of measuring human beings is a modern version of historical periods of governing bodily productions of ‘literacy’ for social control. This reinforces the normalcy of literacy where writing (that counts) is the property of the few (experts, policymakers, learned, professional, wealthy, white, male, able-bodied…), and reading, (to be literate enough) is rule-abiding conduct of the many (masses), (Brandt, 2009). The following section explores how learners resist the normalization of the deficit discourse that privileges reading over writing, by taking up the act of writing themselves as authoring their own creative and critical learning process (Freire, 1991).

5.5  Resisting the deficit character

In this last section of the chapter I return to what the participants in my research focus group said about the selected excerpts from the three documents that were described in Chapter 4. I included these excerpts because basic literacy learners rarely have access to these authoritative representations of who they are, and the act of reading, and reading out loud these particular statements can shift the power of meaning embedded in those words into the voices of the reader (Duncan, 2009). Bringing in these selected statements into the focus groups offered an opportunity to practice a “kind of narrative consciousness” (Sandlin & Clark, 2009, p. 1026) about how powerful narratives are constructed. A dialogical process of critically reading these texts invited expressions of resistance to the dominant discourse of literacy deficiency (Freire, 2011). With the following guiding questions, what do you think this statement is about, do you
agree or disagree with anything in the statement, and what do think it says about adult literacy learners, the participants critically reviewed the expert from the OECD’s PIAAC report. The statement is from the OECD report on the third international adult literacy survey, called the Programme for Assessment of Adult Competencies, (PIAAC). The report is titled, *OECD skills outlook 2013: First results from the survey of adult skills*. The statement focused on what it describes as “social outcomes…of poor literacy skills” (OECD, 2013, p. 27), which was also repeated in the Foreword of the report by the OECD general-secretary. In the section, “What the results show and what this means for policy”, the excerpt that I discussed with participants in my research focus groups was,

> Individuals with lower proficiency in literacy are more likely than those with better literacy skills to report poor health, to believe that they have little impact on political processes, and not to participate in associative or volunteer activities. In most countries, they are also less likely to trust others. (OECD, 2013, p. 27)

The process I used to facilitate the conversations about this statement was the same as with the other two statements. I first read the excerpt out loud and described the document that the statement came from, including the document title, author, date and organization. The participants had a copy of this statement that they could follow as well.

In Chapter 4 where I discussed the participants’ responses to the CMEC quote I found that they initially were inclined accept the deficit descriptions of this text, but not with this quotes. All of the participants expressed disagreement with PIAAC quote right away. One participant said,

> It just makes people sound like if you can’t read or write you want nothing to do with society in a way. I just think those are a bunch of lies. You know, I might
take a test and not be the most literate person but I can read at a pretty good level, and I vote, and I have pretty good health. Right now I don’t volunteer too much because I work a lot and I am going school now, but I trust people. (JA)

Most of the participants said that the PIAAC statement was insulting and they challenged the OECD claims about not volunteering and, as they read it ‘not trusting others’. One participant summed up his feelings being ‘written up’ as a ‘low-literate character’ as he read the quote and challenged the normative assumptions of authoritative knowledge ascribed to institutions. LE reminded us of his story he had shared earlier in the focus group about why he dropped out of high school, he said,

One of the main reasons I dropped out is because I realized how backwards the school system is, it’s like a giant social experiment right? They’re trying to get kids to go through high school and then that’s when they’re figuring out who’s going to take the lower jobs and who’s going to take the higher jobs. So that’s exactly what it was. And I realized that and I just dropped out because it wasn’t really about learning it was about setting everyone up towards what they’re going to be in life.

LE said that he saw the PIAAC survey as doing the “same setting people up” as he experienced in schools, he said, “That’s why they’re doing surveys right, taking the majority of the people and labeling them. I’m not a majority of the people obviously, so I can speak for myself” (LE). LE and the other participant’s refutation of this quote reflected a sense of a shared knowledge among them: they understood that in the dominant normative constructs of being literate and therefore a ‘literate being’, they are labeled as less-than, and that this ‘setting up for life” is structured social inequality and colonization (Atkinson, 2013a; Bartlett, 2007a; Simpson, 2008;
Tett, 2014). Through their conversations it was also very apparent that this is not how they see themselves and how they would write themselves to be.

Resisting the normalization of the deficit literate character is best led by learners’ writing what they know and “expressing their actual language, their anxieties, fears, demands, [and] dreams.” (Freire, 1991, p. 144). The deconstruction of the deficit character also requires educators and others to recognize learners as legitimate writers and to see their writing in the public domain alongside those institutional texts on being literate. I want to return RO’s story introduced in Chapter 4 about her grandmother’s experience of signing her name. This story is powerful and can take us in many different directions but I want to make this point: How one feels when their signature is required, such as on a registration form, is influenced by socio-political constructed norms of being literate enough and in the right way. Resisting literacy shaming about whether one can and how one writes their name necessitates paying attention to the nuances in unequal power relations and to assumptions about what signatures and the signer represent. Mace (2012) argues that of all written texts, one’s signature is fully and completely owned by its author and must be read with an acknowledgement of its owner. She goes on to say that making one’s signature must be viewed as a “human right” (p.72), and that the choice to give or withhold one’s signature is a civil right. However not being able to write your name, to sign it, removes that choice, and in the moment when a signature is required this can feel like “a humiliation” (Mace, 2012, p. 70). The notion of choice was also addressed by Meek (1991), when she described becoming aware of the “powerful assumptions about being literate” (p. 5) by realizing her feelings of confidence about being able to choose to read or not read.
To conclude this chapter I want to restate its title, learning begins in the body, to be as clear as possible that this is the visceral place and space in which learning is experienced. Here is where learning and language, relation and power, emotion and identity make up what we know and feel, which I have called embodied knowledge. I have argued for the significance for learners and the implications for policy of paying closer attention to learner’s embodied knowledge; of having pedagogical frameworks in adult basic literacy where learners are viewed as whole persons and learning is perceived as embodied experience. To do this requires disrupting the obscuring normative gaze and thus the power of those distant testing technologies and ideologies of neo-liberal measurement regimes. Resisting the writing up of the characterization of learners as deficit involves seeing nuanced moments and movements of power by learner’s creative and critical “process of learning to read and write as an act of knowing” (Freire, 1991, p. 143).
Chapter 6
Whose Knowledge Counts in Adult Literacy?

6.1 Introduction

When I began to conduct my research for this thesis I had not seriously considered the concept of embodied knowledge nor had I thought a lot about the prevailing presence of internalized shame. I had ideas about learner’s voice and self-determination as being important, and as resistance to the dominant narratives of literacy deficit. In the drawn out process of analyzing my data sources, examining my own embodied knowledge of my personal history was most difficult, but also most powerful. Understanding how my childhood trauma impacted my schooling experiences surfaced a certain insight into the taboo subjects of violence and shame, and although they feel uncomfortable and disturbing, these haunting memories helped me recognize how such dynamics are often profoundly present in adult literacy education. This uneasy inquiry also illuminated how dominant norming practices of large-scale assessment enterprises and government policy has re-produced a modern sanitized and technological version of the imagined illiterate body that perpetuates shaming and systemic inequality.

Throughout the thesis I have argued for recognition of learners embodied knowledge as a valuable source for pedagogical practice; what learners know is necessary and worthy ‘evidence’ about the process of learning in adult literacy education. I explored the significance of educators paying close attention to the embodied knowledge of learners in order to understand power relations and to notice nuanced moments of resistance to the normative construction of the deficit character. I drew on concepts of ‘embodied knowledge’ from scholars in adult education, the
humanities, fine arts and health. Inspired by Swartz’s (2012) expression about embodied knowledge as “unlanguaged embodied knowing” (p. 17) I drew on Narrative Inquiry to explore how embodied emotion and knowing is often silently but powerfully influential in the literate act and learning process of reading and writing. Horsman’s (2006) investigations on the impact of violence on learning and Bartlett’s (2007a; 2007b) interrogation of literacy and speech shaming greatly informed the direction of my exploration of emotional knowing pushing me toward further examination of trauma and shame, and power relations in basic literacy programs.

My exploration led me to also look back in time to examine how the social and political positioning of reading, as more important and separate from writing, was a form of social ordering, and how this continues today in the measurement regime of international assessments (Atkinson, 2013a; Battiste, 2013; Brandt, 2009; Coleman, 2006; McLaren, 1990; Steeves, 2010). I was inspired by Freire’s (1991, 2011) critical pedagogy, which helped me to examine the normative constructs of reading as separate from writing. This encouraged me to critically reflect upon how in the dominant discourse (learners) writing as an expression of power and identity is obscured, while in classrooms the act of learners creating their own written texts is understood by most practitioners as powerful meaning making and authoring one’s identity and knowledge (Barton, 1994; Burgess, 2012a; Crowther, Maclachlan & Tett, 2010; Freire, 1998; Hamilton, 2012; Ramdeholl, 2011). The Disability Studies concept of interrogating normalcy and the New Literacy Studies concepts of literacy as social practice and learner as knowing subject guided my critical reflection and analysis along the way of the entire research journey. In this journey I learned how to use Narrative Inquiry approaches to help explore the many facets of the
experiences of learners, and myself as a practitioner that are overlooked and undervalued in the measurement regime.

This concluding chapter is organized into the following sections: Plotting the narrative summarizes each of the chapters, followed by how I see my research contributing to scholarly work in adult literacy. Then I suggest possibilities for future research and implications for practice. I also consider future challenges for policy development and finally, I reflect on my learning from this thesis journey.

6.2 Plotting the narrative

In this thesis I have argued that the past three decades of changes in adult literacy education policy has brought significant tensions between policy and practice, particularly in programming for basic literacy learners. In exploring these tensions I have critically examined dominant discursive texts in the changing policy arena and their increasing divergence from curriculum and assessment practices that are informed by, and responsive to the intimate embodied knowledge of learners. I have investigated how the resulting policy discourse objectifies and shames learners, treating them as bodies of deficiency, and obscuring the embodied process of learning.

In Chapter 1 I began with a story as a way to introduce the underlying tensions about competing meanings and interpretations of literacy and learning in adult basic literacy education. That is a philosophical tension between literacy as measurable labour market skills and the social practices view of literacy, and, this tension is ongoing. This tension is located within the focus of this
research: the (dis)connections between current policy about the meaning and measuring of literacy and learning and the self-knowledge of adult basic literacy learners. I introduced the (dis)connections with a short discussion on the ways in which literacy, knowledge and shame are constructed and obscured in the prevailing discourse of deficit of the OECD measurement regime. Notions of deficit are abstracted by the distant surveying projects of this regime, but also intimately known as internalized shame. I introduced the location of my research and described from experiences how I understand basic literacy education and assessment in basic literacy education. I also described my experiences as a practitioner and how I came to see the IALS assessment enterprise as part of a larger measurement regime. After these introductory sections I turned to my own personal history, narrating myself into the story by reflecting on my own experiences as learner and teacher as a way to practice the narrative approach I have been learning to use in this research. At the end of the chapter I provide a short description of Chapters 2 through 6.

In Chapter 2 I described how I have drawn on concepts from New Literacy Studies, Disability Studies, and Narrative Inquiry approaches to explore prevailing norming practices in adult literacy. In the process of writing this dissertation and considering words carefully and critically I have been inching toward Disability Studies ideas about the interrogation of normalcy (Davis, 1995; Graham & Slee, 2008; Titchkosky & Michalko, 2009). Disability Studies ways of inquiry made me think and feel about what tends to be unspoken meanings of power and judgment in the ways that language is used. New Literacy Studies provided a solid theoretical stance from which I began to formulate my thinking for this research (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Collins and Blot, 2003; Prinsloo and Baynam, 2008). Its central argument about understanding literacy within
social and cultural practices and understanding learners as knowers resonated with my experiences as a literacy practitioner and my personal learning in critical feminist studies of learning. I was also able to further explore the ways in which Freire’s critical pedagogy informed New Literacy Scholars thinking. Although I did not begin my research intending to use Narrative Inquiry, I found Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) work on Narrative Inquiry in education resonated with my thinking that was informed by Disability Studies and New Literacy Studies. As I went along I drew increasingly on Narrative Inquiry to guide my analysis and writing the steps I have taken to conduct this research.

In Chapter 3 I traced the expanse and retraction of adult literacy education in Canada from the 1980s to 2016. I began with exploring the build up of the adult literacy field and how national surveys led to Canada’s leading role in the OECD international literacy assessment enterprise. I described my early experiences in entering the field at the time when OECD IALS survey results were being taken up in the field and reflected on how I got swept up in the dominant discourse even though at a gut-level this deficit narrative did not match my experiences with learners and practitioners. I explored the underlying tensions around the divergent philosophical views about literacy, and questioned the ways in which persuasive notions of evidence and data, and common language and essentials skills changed basic literacy education. (Atkinson, 2015; Hamilton, 2912; Pinsent-Johnson, 2014; Smythe, 2015; Tett, Hamilton & Crowther, 2012). I continued to draw on my experiences during the years of retraction of basic literacy education provision in Canada, which I suggest occurred between the OECD ALL and PIAAC surveys. I described the growing pressure that practitioners and literacy activists experienced to compromise and conform to the government privileging of essential skills over literacy. I described the shifting
policy direction toward measurement and away from learning, and I began to seriously ask the key question: if assessment was not about learning then what is it about? I concluded Chapter three by suggesting the PIAAC’s description of a new “missing” category was symbolic of the normalization project of the past nearly three decades that produced the current measurement regime.

In Chapter 4 I drew on Disability Studies to examine the discursive production of the deficit character in policy narratives on Canada’s literacy crisis (Erevelles, 2000; Gabel, 2009; Graham & Slee, 2008; Michalko, 2009; Titchkosky, 2008b). I described my experience in a community development project as an example of the ease in which the deficit discourse penetrates local narratives on adult literacy. I reflected on my own experiences of dissonance as I found myself partaking in the new IALS ‘number-making’ (Gorur, 2015) discussions about fixing the “low skilled population”. I examined the OECD and policy use of ‘social outcomes’ data as a way to categorize people’s life experiences and emotional sense of self to translate them into ‘detrimental’ outcomes of their ‘poor literacy’. Bartlett (2007a) and Darville (1999) helped me to examine how the normative constructions of personal shaming stories converged with the OECD authority of statistical evidence on the “characteristic of the deficits of the low skilled population” (OECD & Statistics Canada, 2005, p. 309). I came to see those characteristics as statistical representations of undereducated and usually racialized, disabled, poor and under or unemployed bodies, and as norming practices in colonization and objectification. All of this, I argue constructs a deficit character, which is a modern, sanitized version of the historically ‘illiterate’ figure. Finally, as I came to see how this deficit figure was constructed, I was able to
recognize and find ways to begin to deconstruct this measurement regime that needs the deficit character to justify its prejudicial disavow of learners’ embodied knowledge.

In Chapter 5 I have drawn on personal stories by learners and myself as counter narratives to the normalizing discourse of literacy deficiency (Sandlin & Clark, 2009). As I wrote this chapter I was aware of a visceral presence of resistance. I consciously pushed off the weight of the prevailing narratives of deficit, to better see and hear narratives of embodied learning and knowing. This felt like slowing down the pace to pay close attention to the nuanced internal movements and moments of doing reading and doing writing and making meaning, as this is what basic literacy learning is about. I did this by looking closely at my embodied knowledge in reading texts that ‘hit a nerve’ and by exploring concepts of embodied knowledge (Butterwick & Selman, 2012; Freiler, 2008; Lipson-Lawrence, 2012; Nieves, 2012; Swartz, 2012). I also did this by paying attention to participants in my research focus group as they told stories about their lives and learning, and their uneasy relationship with text. I drew on New Literacy Studies scholars and practitioner research to explore learning in relationship (Lefebvre et al., 2006; Tett & Maclachlan, 2008; Zimmerman, 2004). This opened up ways to talk about violence and shame, systemic discrimination and colonialism. I drew on Brandt (2009) and Freire’s (2011) critical pedagogy thinking to examine what happened to ‘writing’ in the dominant deficit discourse that privileges reading over writing. Mace (1992) helped me to consider how writing holds power that is a central practice in basic literacy classrooms, known and practiced by many practitioner and learners. Finally, I suggested that when learners become authors they disrupt the obscuring normative gaze of those distant technologies and ideologies of the measurement regime (Michalko, 2009).
6.3 Contributions to scholarship

In this thesis I have tried to foster dialogue between the field of adult literacy education and scholarship in the fields of New Literacy Studies, Disability Studies and Narrative Inquiry. Although some scholars have examined some of these intersections (Clandinin & Raymond, 2006; Collins & Ferri, 2016; Miller, 2009) bringing approaches from all three together has not, to my knowledge, been previously done in scholarly research on adult literacy. My argument in doing so is that it offered me a way to investigate images of adult literacy and images of disability that have been historically and are currently intertwined with norming discourses on disability and illiteracy. I did this by thinking about the interiority of the body where knowing in the form of feelings, senses and memories make up the embodied knowledge of learners and practitioners. This opened up ways to examine how violence and trauma become silenced as internalized shame and literacy deficits (Bartlett, 2007a; Horsman, 2006; Walker, 2017) and how the political privileging of reading over writing is a form of social ordering (Brandt, 2009). I have argued for greater focus on writing in basic literacy education as it can be a way to investigate and to shift power, emotion, authorship and learner identity (Burgess, 2012a; Burgess & Ivanič, 2010; Darville, 1989; Freire, 1998; Mace, 1992; Morgan, 1997). My contribution to scholarly inquiry on adult literacy is informed by Hamilton’s (2000) point about the importance of understanding learners and educators “starting points and assumptions about literacy” (p. 2), and, to also consider starting points and assumptions about learning and embodied knowing.

6.4 Possibilities for future research

By drawing boundaries and sharpening the focus as my research unfolded I was aware that I would end up examining certain things more than others. My increasing focus on the space of
dissonance in between the policy emphasis on measurement and the embodied knowledge of basic literacy learners gradually illuminated the powerful influence of emotion on the process of learning. I now see the ending place of this research as a starting place for future further inquiry on the complexities of adult literacy learners’ embodied knowing, including shame, and further exploration of this intimate knowledge in relationship to dominant narratives on literacy and literate bodies.

I also see the value of further research on embodied knowledge as a crucial source for critical pedagogical practices. Extending from New Literacy Studies approaches to literacy as social practice and their attention to power relations, I see possibilities for future research that investigates the connections between both learners and practitioners’ visceral knowings and the socio-political structures of inequality and colonization. I also see the potential for adult literacy researchers to draw on Disability Studies’ approaches to further deconstruct normalcy in the making of adult literacy.

Finally, I am excited about the idea of more research that draws on Freirian philosophical approaches to explore the interplay amongst emotion, memory and the technicalities of learning to read and write. Learning basic literacy is a process of learning how to be in relationship with language, particularly having a sense – feelings – of having power in relation with language. This is often most readily experienced through the creative act of writing. I am most interested in further research on Freire’s idea on the conscious practice of literacy learning as a process of dynamic movement involving reading, writing and re-writing the word and the world.
6.5 Hope for practice

When I began my PhD I wanted to make sure that the end product, this dissertation would be written in an accessible way for literacy practitioners and others working with basic literacy learners. My hope is that some practitioners will find it relevant for their practice. For those who have worked in this field for a long time, I hope this work may offer some insight on the past series of events that led to the current narrow policy scope where accessibility and curriculum based on whole person learning is seriously restricted. I hope that my use of Disability Studies concepts such as the hegemony of normalcy and writing under erasure offers practitioners some ways to help make sense of how we got to where we are now. I also encourage practitioners to build their critical thinking and vocabulary to articulate their own embodied knowledge about how literacy learning unfolds.

From my experiences, I fully agree with and find comfort in the idea that adult literacy practitioners are “hard-wired for hope” (Battell, 2004). Hope as expressed in the acts of creating and valuing counter narratives to what I have called the measurement regime is a pedagogically critical form of hope (Freire, P., Freire, A. & Freire, P., 1994; Horsman & Woodrow, 2006). I want my exploration of how ‘learning begins in the body’ to resonate with practitioners, to encourage them to see their approaches to teaching and learning as an embodied emotional process, and in so doing to notice in their own practice the ways in which they resist the narrative of the deficit character.
6.6 Future challenges for policy

Plenty of evidence already exists to inform a future change in policy direction in ways that recognize literacy learning as told by learners (Lefebvre et al.; Jackson & Schaetti, 2014). Informed by New Literacy Studies and the research-in-practice movements on several continents, both practitioners and scholars have produced a large body of qualitative research that offers recommendations for policy development (Burgess 2012b; Gardner & Witkoskyj, 2014; Hamilton, 2012b; Horsman & Woodrow, 2006; Parkinson, 2006; Tett et al., 2006). Also, practitioner led policy development work already exists: for example I was involved in a province-wide initiative to produce a “comprehensive proposed literacy policy” (Max Bell Foundation, 2006, p. 5) that was submitted to the Government of Alberta in 2006. Sadly, it was not endorsed; instead three years later the government presented a policy document that was strongly aligned with the OECD assessment framework (Government of Alberta, 2009).

The current policies on adult literacy education appear to be moving in the opposite direction from what I, and other practitioners have been calling for: to value and support learning as holistic and for life-wide desires and intentions. In my experience the policy directions that most practitioners have been calling for have been toward policy frameworks that use a social practice approach to literacy, support a range of programs that recognize the diversity of learners, and understand learning from a critical pedagogy perspective. Even under the weight of the measurement regime with its narrowed “neoliberal …. market orientation” (Gorur, 2015, p. 3) many practitioners have found ways to work-around constricting policies and regulations and at the same time continue to call for policies that recognize learners knowledge and lived experiences as valuable (Smythe, 2015; Tett, 2014). In my experience there are many
practitioners who continue to remember that literacy and adult literacy education means something other than what it has been made to mean in the measurement regime. The challenge is the lack of political will to recognize and fund learning programs for basic reading and writing for adults and their life-wide interests.

6.7  Ending with my own embodied learning

For me the most significant part of doing this PhD has been a surfacing of my own knowing. I have experienced a sense of familiar feelings about knowing. It is as if I am seeing in the words I write things that I already know at a deep embodied level. I understand this surfacing of inner knowledge is what Freire describes as dialogical ‘dynamic movement’. Through the learning I have experienced with reading the theoretical literature, the dominant discursive texts, and in dialogue with the participants, and very much with my supervisor I was able to create this text with a growing certainty of presence that is what I aim for in my practice with learners. My experience in learning how to write this thesis is how I am interpreting Freire’s notion of doing “practice to learn” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 46).

In the process of doing this thesis I have also gained insight into moments of resonance in my teaching practices with learners. For example, such a resonating moment is when I recognize in learners a feeling of not being able to find the right word(s) in those momentary encounters when particular words are expected or required. This can be in the middle of a conversation, looking at a written text, holding a pencil or feeling ones fingers on a keyboard. In these moments the feeling of struggling to find the words to say what is already known is how I see what Swartz (2012) called “unlanguaged embodied knowing” (p. 17). As an educator my experiences in these
moments are intuitive and profound. In these learning moments I see the importance of giving space and simultaneously staying close enough to the learner to support them to make those intricate moves of finding/making the words that match the meanings that are emotionally known and/or known in the body. Reflecting on these moments I now see that this happens best when reading and talking are done in concert with writing, and writing is leading the learning process.

In the process of doing this thesis I was also continuously reminded about why history matters. The meaning of literacy, particularly adult literacy in the current measurement regime, has been constructed over a very long period of time by the literate experts writing upon the bodies of “oppressed and marginalized groups” (Lerner, 1997, p. xvi). I learned (again and again) why looking back with critical questions in mind can make new meanings when looking inward and outward now and toward the future. I learned, or actually was reminded, that seeing literacy as political is a necessary starting point for doing adult literacy work; and the value of my own feminist learning to see the personal as political that brings bodily knowing to the forefront and claims that intimate bodily knowledge counts. I learned that writing as a way of ‘making record’ of one’s own knowledge, such as this thesis, is a practice in authoring oneself into the world, just as it is a core practice in basic literacy education (Freire, 1991).

Finally, I have learned that the long-standing philosophical tension between literacy as measurable labour market skills and the social practices view of literacy is ongoing. This thesis is an examination of the embodiment of this tension: of how many people, including myself, feel
about themselves in relation to the dominant normalizing social and political narratives about literacy and illiteracy; and how all of these stories are held in our body memories and emotions.
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doi:10.1080/14767724.2013.858996


doi:10.1080/02601370802408316


Appendices
Appendix A

Professional and Policy Documents

Total: 20 documents

Fifteen documents were reports and policy documents by government and the OECD:


Two documents were reports by government sponsored think tank and research organizations:


Three public information documents by national and provincial literacy organizations.


Appendix B

Information Letter for Administrative Consent

(insert representative name)
(insert name of a college department here)
(insert name and address of college here)

(insert date)

Dear Dean XXX,

I am contacting you to request the assistance of XXX College for my current PhD research project: *Troubling the measures of adult literacy*. I am a student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. This study is for my doctoral thesis and will be conducted under the supervision of (insert name).

Briefly, my study explores how students feel about their learning, their perspectives on literacy, and how they know they are improving. I am also looking at how adult literacy and basic education programs, organizations and governments describe adult literacy, learning and improvement. The data is being collected for the purposes of a PhD thesis and perhaps for subsequent research articles.

I would like to recruit students in adult literacy and basic education programs in the XXX department at XXX College to voluntarily participate in 4 focus groups. The same (8 – 10) students will participate in all four focus groups. I am requesting your assistance with my study in two ways:

1. To give consent for me to invite instructors and tutors in adult literacy and basic education programs in XXX College to volunteer to assist with recruiting students to voluntarily participate in my study.

2. To give consent that I can use a meeting room or classroom for the focus groups in this study. There are 4 focus groups, which will occur every 2 weeks from [insert date] to [insert date], at 4:00 – 5:30 pm. There will be the same 8–10 students in all four focus groups.

I would appreciate the assistance of instructors and tutors with recruiting students in the following adult literacy and basic education programs: (insert names of programs). I am requesting that instructors and tutors in these programs allow me to a few minutes in their class to inform and invite students to participate in my research. I will also ask instructors and tutors to volunteer to read out loud the attached invitation script and invitation poster to students. I am also requesting that instructors and tutors volunteer to place the invitation to participate poster and contact information cards in an accessible location in or near the classroom for students to read and take a contact information card.

Participants will at no time be judged or evaluated and that no value judgements will be placed on their responses. Only the researcher will have access to the data. Participants will remain anonymous in the final thesis, and once it is complete I can send you a digital copy.

In order to comply with the University of Toronto research ethics guidelines for my study, any participation must be strictly voluntary, not required or requested by you as the students’ college. Regarding instructors and tutors, their assistance with recruiting students must also be strictly
voluntary, not required or requested by you as their employer.

If you agree, please indicate your consent by signing below. Please make a copy for your files and return this letter to me in the envelope provided. You may also contact my supervisor, (insert name) at (insert phone number) or (insert email). Finally, you may also contact the U of T Office of Research Ethics for questions about the rights of research participants at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273.

Thank you

Audrey Gardner
PhD Student - OISE/University of Toronto
(insert phone number and email)

XXX College Representative: __ (Print name) _______________________

__________________________
(Email and phone number) 

My signature indicates that I understand and give consent to the above request by Audrey Gardner, PhD Student, OISE, University of Toronto

(Signature of College representative)
Appendix C

Script: Invitation to Participate

Invitation Script
(read out loud)

I am a PhD student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. I am doing a study for my PhD on what students think about their learning and how they know they are improving. You are invited to join this study and share your thoughts and experiences about learning in programs like this. I also work here at the college as a coordinator in the XXX Department. This study is not part of my work at the college. It is for my PhD at the University of Toronto.

I am looking for about 8 – 10 students to volunteer to join a focus group. The focus group will meet 4 times over about 8 weeks.

Participation is voluntary.

This poster has some more information, and I will just read through it for you [read poster].

If you are interested or if you have some questions please contact me. You can take one of these cards with my contact details. The poster and cards will be here [in the classroom] for the next three weeks.

Your instructor/tutor will have no way of knowing whether you participate or not, that your participation is completely voluntary and it will not affect your grade in this course/program or relationship with your instructor/tutor.
Appendix D

Invitation to Participate Poster and Contact Information Card

Poster:

Would you like to be part of a research study on what students think about learning and how they know they are improving?

I am a student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. This study is for my doctoral thesis and will be conducted under the supervision of (insert name). I also currently work at XXX College and in the past I was a literacy teacher here.

My research is on how students view their own learning. I am also looking at how adult literacy and basic education programs, organizations and governments describe adult literacy, learning and improvement. The reason I am doing this study is because there is not a lot of existing research from the viewpoint of students about learning and improvement.

I want to find out how you know you are learning and how you know you are getting better at things like: reading, writing, math, working with others, using computers or cell phones, and other ways you know that you are improving. I also want to know how you feel about learning.

Participation is voluntary. To participate you need to be a student who:

- Is 18 years or older.
- Has been in a literacy or basic education program for at least one term or 4 months in programs such as (XXX).
- Is able to attend all four meetings. These meetings are called focus groups.
- Agrees to allow audio recording of all four focus groups.

In the focus groups:

- There will be 8 to 10 students
- We will meet for 1 ½ hours (90 minutes)
- We will meet 4 times. We will meet every 2 weeks. The focus groups will occur on these dates: (insert dates)___, ___, ___, ___ at 4:00 pm in room ___ at the College.
- I will facilitate each focus group

This study will start on (insert date)

If you would like to be part of this study please contact me at:

- (insert phone number here) or (insert email here)

Contact Information Card:

Researcher: Audrey Gardner
(insert phone number here)
(insert email here)

Supervisor: XXX
(insert phone number here)
(insert email here)
Appendix E

Information and Consent Form

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of my research is to explore how you think and feel about your learning and improvement, and to compare this with how programs, organizations and governments describe and view adult literacy and basic education, learning and improvement. The research is from my PhD thesis study and I may write articles and publish them in journals and books.

Procedures

If you agree to participate in this study, I will ask you to sign this consent form to indicate your agreement. I will give you a copy of the signed consent form and tell you the dates and place for the focus groups. Please arrive on time. Snacks will be provided and tea and juice will be served. With your voluntary consent, I will audio record each focus group. This is for me to be able to write up notes and write my thesis report.

When the study is complete, I will write a short summary and if you want a copy of the summary you can give me your contact information (phone or email) and I will contact you when the study is complete to give you a copy. You can add your phone number or email to this consent form.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

All information about you will remain strictly confidential and anonymous. I will remove names and other identifying information from the written notes, and no real names will be used in any publication of study results. I will keep the written notes and audio recordings in a locked filing cabinet and password secure computer at my home office during the study, and then destroy them when the study is done. As researcher I cannot guarantee confidentiality of participants in the focus group, however it is expected that participants will maintain confidentiality. This means that what we talk about in the focus group must not be repeated to others. Only I will have access to the data.

Participation and Withdrawal

If you decide to participate in the study you have the right to refuse to answer any question in the focus group. You can also choose to withdraw from the study at anytime without any consequence. If you withdraw, I will remove all personal information, which is: prior level of education, age, gender, first language, ability, where you are from. Because the information from the focus groups is like conversations, I cannot remove one person’s statements without changing the whole conversation. This means that what you say in the focus groups cannot be removed if you withdraw.

Potential Risks and Benefits

You may benefit from join the focus group by sharing your knowledge and experience with other students, and listening to other students talk about their ideas about literacy, learning and improvement. There is limited research in adult literacy that is from the standpoint of student experiences. Your contribution may help bring new insight into how students experience learning and improvement.

There are minimum risks in this study. There is a chance that you may feel uncomfortable, embarrassed or upset because of some information that may be shared in the focus groups. You or others may share things that you feel are private. To minimize these risks, you will only be asked to share what is comfortable for you. You will be encouraged to contact me or my supervisor at any time during the study if you have concerns about your participation.
As a participant in this research study I understand that:

- I voluntarily can give my consent for all focus groups to be audio recorded.
- Audrey may take notes during the focus groups.
- My ideas or words may be used in the study’s summary and thesis.
- I do not have to answer questions I do not want to.
- My name will not be used.
- Participating in this study is not connected to my program in any way.
- I will at no time be judged or evaluated
- If I want a copy of the summary of the findings from the study, I agree to give Audrey my contact information (phone number or email) and she will contact me at the end of the study.
- I can change my mind about participating in the study at any time, and if I do not want to be part of the study I can leave. If I leave after the focus groups have started, any information I gave before the first focus group started will be removed, but what I said in the focus group(s) will be kept as part of the study.
- If I want to change my mind about participating in the study, I have to contact Audrey’s supervisor (insert name).

If you have any questions related to your rights as a research participant, or if you have any complaints or concerns about how you have been treated as a research participant please contact the U of T Office of Research Ethics at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 1-416-946-3273

Signatures

I understand what this study is about. I have been given a copy of this form.

Print name of participant: ____________________________

Signature of participant: ____________________________ Date: ______________

Signature of researcher : ____________________________ Date: ______________

If you would like a copy of the summary of findings from the study please write your phone number of email and I will contact you when the study is complete:

Phone or email: _____________________________________

Please keep a copy of this consent letter for your records.
Researcher contact information:

Name: Audrey Gardner       Phone:
Email: (insert here)
Address: (insert here)

Researcher’s Supervisor contact information

Name: (XXX) Phone: 1(insert here)
Email: (insert here)
Address: (insert here)
Appendix F
Focus Group Guiding Questions

1. Have you participated in a research study before?

2. What brought you [here] to this focus group? (Why did you come?)

3. Why did you decide to join your (literacy/basic education) program?

4. In your program, what has been helpful for you so far? (How has this helped you learn?)

5. How would you describe 'learning'? (5a. When you learn something new in your program, do you notice changes in your life? If so, what do you notice)

6. What does it mean to you to do well in your program? (How do you feel about yourself? Is it the same or different than how you felt before the program started? Why do you think that is?)

7. How would you describe ‘improvement’?

8. How would you describe ‘literacy’? (What does the word literacy mean to you?)

9. I will read three definitions and descriptions of literacy by different organizations and then I will ask you to respond to a couple of questions.
   o UNESCO 1951
   o Persepolis, Sept 3-5 1975
   o IALS – OECD & Statistics Canada, 2000
   QUESTIONS:
   a. Do you agree and what do you think it means?
   b. How does it compare to your own (descriptions or definition?) of literacy

10. I will read some quotes from reports from the Canadian government and organizations on adult literacy and for each one I will ask you to responds to a few questions:
    • MCL 2002 Health and literacy fact sheet
    • CMEC 2006: Section: Executive summary: Direct and indirect support
    • OECD PIAAC 2013: Section: Social outcomes of literacy
    QUESTIONS:
    a. What do you think this is about?
    b. Do you agree or disagree with anything in the statement?
    c. What do you think this says about adult literacy learners?

11. How do you see yourself as a learner? Suggest they can start with one of these starting points: I feel..., I think...., I am.....
Appendix G
Definitions and Descriptions of Literacy


   A person is literate who can with understanding both read and write a short simple statement on his/her everyday life.


2. The Persepolis Declaration, from the International Symposium for Literacy, Persepolis, 3-8 September 1975. UNESCO.

   Literacy work, like education in general, is a political act. It is not neutral, for the act of revealing social reality in order to transform it, or of concealing it in order to preserve it, is political. Literacy is not an end in itself. It is a fundamental human right.


   Literacy is a person’s ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work, and in the community in order to reach one’s goals, and develop one’s knowledge and potential.

Appendix H

Excerpts from Professional and Policy Documents

1. “People with lower literacy skills are more likely to be under stress. People with lower literacy skills are more likely to work and live in unsafe or dangerous environments and suffer the consequences. Less literate people often wait longer to seek medical help so health problems reach a crisis state. (MCL, 2002, P. 2)

From: Literacy is for life Fact Sheet series, Movement for Canadian Literacy. Factsheet #6 Literacy is for Health. (2002).

2. “Adult literacy learners live their daily lives challenged by the detrimental effects of their low literacy. The enduring effects of their life experiences include a lack of self-confidence, social isolation, poor communication skills, and lack of knowledge about available resources (Faris & Blunt, 2006, p. 8)


3. “Individuals with lower proficiency in literacy are more likely than those with better literacy skills to report poor health, to believe that they have little impact on political processes, and not to participate in associative or volunteer activities. In most countries, they are also less likely to trust others (OECD, 2013, p. 3)