

**Connecting Practitioners and Researchers:
An Evaluation of NCSALL'S
Practitioner Dissemination and Research Network**

**Cristine Smith, Mary Beth Bingman,
Judy Hofer, Patsy Medina, and
Practitioner Leaders**

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National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy

**Harvard University Graduate School of Education
101 Nichols House, Appian Way
Cambridge, MA 02138**

The Problem

To improve their instruction, teachers in adult literacy education rely on trial and error or turn to their peers for advice. Most do not draw on a source of solid information: research findings.

The Cause

Teachers aren't exposed to research in the field of adult learning and literacy. When they are, it isn't provided in a way they can easily use. They also lack mechanisms to help them assess, understand, and apply new research findings. Teachers need research that is informed by practice, and that offers strategies and techniques they can implement in their work.

The Response

NCSALL's Practitioner Dissemination and Research Network (PDRN) set out to create and support systematic partnerships between practitioners and university researchers to better connect research and practice, with the ultimate outcome of improved practice, policy, and services for adult learners.

At the heart of the PDRN were Practitioner Leaders, adult basic education teachers from 14 states who worked with NCSALL between 1997 and 2001. They shared information about NCSALL studies; identified programs to serve as research sites, conducted their own research on topics related to NCSALL research; helped other practitioners in their states conduct research on similar topics; and organized staff development activities-such as study circles-to present NCSALL research results to practitioners and encourage use of new theories or recommended practices.

Lessons Learned

Perhaps the most important lesson we learned through the PDRN is that practitioners are interested in research. Conventional wisdom has long dictated that practitioners are wary of research or don't find it relevant, and this is certainly true for some practitioners. However, the PDRN experience demonstrated more clearly that the driving factor for what most adult education teachers do in their classrooms is "what works." Therefore, the PDRN's lessons should inform a larger effort in our field to help teachers and policy-makers learn how to integrate information about "what works" according to research with "what works" according to colleagues and their own experience.

The lessons from the PDRN are the following:

1. Connecting practitioners and researchers has a positive impact on practitioners and practice.

Involvement with research expands practitioners' views of the field of adult literacy and their role as professionals in it. Learning about research signals to many practitioners that they are part of an established field of education important enough to have research funded and conducted, that there are things to be learned and practice and policy improvements to be made, and that improvements require professional practitioners to make them.

The PDRN has transformed me both personally and professionally. Before the PDRN, I would read an occasional research abstract, usually from the K-12 arena, and try to apply it to my classroom. I was not aware of research done in the adult education arena. Now, not only am I aware of adult education research, I am a researcher myself. I don't shy away from research articles and instead have developed a means of understanding the research process and analyzing results.

Pam Meader, Practitioner Leader

2. Connecting practitioners and researchers has a positive impact on researchers and research.

Involving practitioners in research design, implementation, and analysis improves the quality and usefulness of research. Researchers involved in the PDRN felt they better understood how their research "fit" the problems practitioners face and how to improve their research based on the realities of practice. Some also felt practitioners' involvement in the process of research and analysis aided and improved implementation of the research. They recognized that practitioner research offered information that complemented their own research, thereby adding to knowledge on the topic for the field.

I have been able to share data and initial findings from our research projects with the Practitioner Leaders, and their feedback has been invaluable. In addition [a] Practitioner Leader and two practitioner researchers became data collectors for our ESOL project. They are now in the process of helping us analyze data.

Patsy Medina, Rutgers Researcher

3. Effectively connecting researchers and practitioners requires specific strategies, including:
 - Involving practitioners in the research so they become research consumers. Research consumers look for new research findings; feel comfortable learning about them; know how to analyze them; and think about how to apply them via classroom or program strategies, techniques, and ideas. When practitioners are involved in research themselves, they see it as something valuable to their work and professional lives, and they seek and use it. However, learning about the results of research (either university or practitioner) from other practitioners is also powerful.
 - Having Practitioner Leaders focus on a limited number of research studies-preferably related to their own interests or research-to increase their ability to help colleagues understand research findings.

- Gaining researchers' and practitioners' commitment to working collaboratively on research. When we found ways to connect practitioner and university researchers in discussing their joint research interests and findings, both practitioners and university researchers learned more than they would have from their own research individually. These collaborations led to changes in the Practitioner Leaders' practice and their programs' practice.
- Selecting the right Practitioner Leader. Practitioner Leaders with some prior experience with research or a leadership role within their state, as well as a stable job in and long-term commitment to the field, were more effective. Although facilitating a study circle could be a short-term commitment, conducting classroom research and connecting with NCSALL researchers was a long-term endeavor. In addition, keeping Practitioner Leaders beyond one year meant their contribution to the PDRN became more valuable over time.
- Holding face-to-face meetings between network members (researchers, Practitioner Leaders, and coordinators). We experimented with many ways to establish and maintain a strong connection among all the people in the 14-state network. Face-to-face meetings were by far the most helpful, increasing Practitioner Leaders' commitment to the larger goal. However, ongoing and institutionalized strategies ensuring that researchers provide feedback to Practitioner Leaders who are writing about research are also critical. Although researchers felt positive about the input from and collaboration with practitioners, practitioners did not always feel as positive about the feedback they received from researchers. A more concrete process through which practitioners' research reports would be sent to specific researchers, who would respond with written comments about the research content, might have led to ongoing interactions and provided the element practitioners needed to feel they were having an impact on researchers.

University researchers need access to the field to conduct research. They also recognize that practitioners in the field have important insights about their work with adult learners. Moreover, many practitioners need and want to be challenged to participate at the cutting edge of practice. True collaboration creates spaces for researchers and practitioners to question preconceived assumptions about the field and about their own work. When practitioner researchers and university researchers collaborate, we each bring to the research endeavor unique insights that have the potential to forge powerful and innovative change.

Susan Finn Miller, Practitioner Leader

4. Effectively connecting researchers and practitioners requires specific supports for Practitioner Leaders, local practitioners, program directors, and state staff.

For Practitioner Leaders, necessary supports include:

- Assistance and training from their state and/or a national organization such as NCSALL, to help them think about not only their PDRN work, but also what

they need to do the job well and grow. Specifically, Practitioner Leaders need support to develop work plans, lead research and professional development activities, document their work and its outcomes, reflect on their growth as teachers and researchers, share experiences and ideas with other Practitioner Leaders, and view themselves as part of a network.

- Adequate, funded time built into their jobs for research, professional development, and outreach. Their stipend has to cover enough hours to keep this work consistently at the forefront; we were only able to afford to pay Practitioner Leaders to work 100 hours a year (an average of 2 hours a week). If the stipend and the job were 25 percent or even 50 percent of the Practitioner Leaders' time, this work would become a more consistent commitment, and they could regularly engage in dissemination activities. We discovered that full-time practitioners, for whom the field of adult literacy was a career, were more likely to be able to make this commitment. However, full-time practitioners cannot add outside work equaling even 5-10 percent time to their existing ABE jobs-they don't have enough time in their lives. This means funding ABE programs to free up some of their teaching time and paying them through the program to be a Practitioner Leader.
- Clear roles and responsibilities. In an attempt to be "participatory," we initially left the Practitioner Leaders' dissemination activities fairly undefined. This ended up making Practitioner Leaders feel confused about whether they were "doing the right thing" in their states. In the second year, we developed a solid list of outreach, research, and professional development activities for each Practitioner Leader. This was an improvement but too structured for some Practitioner Leaders. In Year 3, we created an agreed-upon slate of activity categories that each Practitioner Leader would do (i.e., some outreach, something that is a real collaboration of research with a NCSALL researcher, some professional development). With the PDRN Coordinator's help, the Practitioner Leaders also developed individual work plans identifying their exact outreach, research, and professional development activities. This seemed to work best because it allowed Practitioner Leaders (and the states in which they worked) to organize specific activities appropriate for their state, while ensuring that all Practitioner Leaders were doing the same types of activities.

For local practitioners, necessary supports include:

- Activities such as study circles and practitioner research that involve them in their own research and with other researchers' work, combined with paid staff release time and sustained opportunities to engage in these activities. One of the most effective ways for practitioners to learn about and use research is interactive professional development. Practitioners need venues where they can hear about or read research, talk

about it with other practitioners, and strategize with other practitioners how to apply research in their own classroom and program. For this to happen, practitioners need to be able to attend staff development activities that are more than one-shot “information out” sessions at a conference. However, Practitioner Leaders reported that practitioners in many states did not receive paid release time to attend staff development (or the flexible schedules required to be released from their classes), so recruiting teachers to participate in study circles was sometimes difficult. Conducting any kind of “connecting practice and research” professional development activities will be difficult in states that do not provide paid staff development release time for teachers to participate.

- A practitioner in the role of a “leader,” who can provide ongoing training and connections to researchers and larger research studies. Connecting practitioners with research and researchers calls for practitioner involvement at both the participation and leadership levels.
- State funding and a designated staff person. Funding should be integrated into research, state, and program budgets on an ongoing basis. Providing funds for professional development activities and offering paid staff development release time are part of this. In addition, designating a staff person at the state level to coordinate activities is critical.

To further support connections between practitioners and researchers, local program directors and state staff need a means to develop an understanding of and systems for practitioner research and research-based professional development. According to the Practitioner Leaders, program directors and state-level staff didn’t always have an understanding of activities that help practitioners learn about or conduct research, and the activities’ critical role in changing practice. Therefore, several Practitioner Leaders talked about the need for professional development designed to help program directors and state staff understand, promote, and sponsor practitioner involvement in research.

It would be highly beneficial for NCSALL to help the participant states develop financial commitment in terms of writing funding allowances into future state budgets that would allow practitioners’ participation in PDRN activities, not as an aid to NCSALL but as a benefit to state programs and a direct benefit to practitioners who meet students face to face.

Art LaChance, Practitioner Leader

Practice, Research, and Policy Recommendations

The overall implication of our work with the PDRN is that connecting researchers and practitioners in the field of adult learning and literacy will require a national system connecting practice, policy, and research. This system should operate in every state,

involve all adult literacy research and researchers, and include both professional development and policy-setting activities. Such a system can ensure that research findings are used in practice and that research studies are based on practical problems, thereby maximizing the investment of research funding. Specifically, we recommend the following:

- Provide federal and state funding for activities that help practitioners understand and use research. Study circles and practitioner research were particularly useful in the PDRN. These and other professional development activities that engage practitioners in thinking about new research should be incorporated into the professional development systems in each state. Also offer technical assistance to states in which delivery of research-based professional development is new.
- Develop activities, such as policy problem-solving seminars, that help policymakers understand and use research. Sessions in which policymakers use new research to solve problems and suggest new policies for better service delivery should be a critical feature in each state.
- Involve and fund practitioners as co-researchers and investigators with adult literacy researchers at both the national and state levels, providing structures that allow them to interact in sustained, meaningful, face-to-face ways. Any national system will have to experiment with mechanisms to connect all researchers through their state systems, as well as find ways to overcome geographical barriers to connecting national researchers to researchers at the state level.
- Provide funding at the state, national, and research-study levels, as well as technical assistance and coordination, to enable states to integrate research, practice, and policy activities into their current systems to improve service delivery. Each state will need to assess its current strategies and supports to determine what must be added to help connect practitioners and researchers.

If a system connecting practice, policy, and research is to work effectively, it can't only be a process of research *to* practice. There must be a way for practitioners and policymakers to provide input into national-level research agenda setting, funding, and design. Ongoing and systematic processes are needed within each state for practitioners and policymakers to identify the problems they face in improving service delivery that research can help them address. Information about these problems, as well as research design suggestions, should have an established mechanism to reach those who fund and design research. We would anticipate two positive results: Research would more likely address the real needs of those working in adult literacy at the grassroots level, and practitioners and policymakers would be more receptive to the research because they were more involved in advocating for it. In short, practitioners and policymakers would become more active research consumers.

Next Steps

NCSALL is working in collaboration with the National Institute for Literacy, the National Adult Education Professional Development Consortium, and other individuals and organizations in the field of adult literacy to support the development of a national system for connecting practice, policy, and research for the field of adult learning and literacy. By 2006, we hope to be further down the road to establishing a national system in which practitioners and researchers can be better connected, problems and concerns of practitioners make their way into the design and funding of adult literacy-related research that better serves the field, and improvements in practice and policy are made based on solid research conducted by both practitioners and researchers, working together.

There needs to be dedicated “hard money” from the federal government, through the Department of Education, to support adequate and high-quality professional development for ABE practitioners so that there is an institutionalized structure within which research can be connected with practice.

Cristine Smith, PDRN Coordinator

To read the full report about the Practitioner Dissemination and Research Network, learn more about the Connecting Practice, Policy, and Research initiative and other NCSALL projects, or order copies of NCSALL publications in print, please visit <http://ncsall.gse.harvard.edu>.



National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy

NCSALL's Mission

The National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) provides information used to improve practice in programs that offer adult basic education, English for speakers of other languages, and adult secondary education. In pursuit of this goal, NCSALL has undertaken research in four areas: learner motivation, classroom practice and the teaching/learning interaction, staff development, and assessment.

NCSALL conducts basic and applied research; builds partnerships between researchers and practitioners; disseminates research and best practices to practitioners, scholars, and policymakers; and works with the field of adult literacy education to develop a comprehensive research agenda.

NCSALL is a partnership of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, World Education, Rutgers University, Portland State University in Oregon, and the Center for Literacy Studies at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. NCSALL receives funding from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Institute for Postsecondary Education, Libraries, and Lifelong Learning; the Wallace-Reader's Digest Funds; the National Institute for Literacy; and the Office of Vocational and Adult Education.

NCSALL's Dissemination Initiative

NCSALL's dissemination initiative focuses on ensuring that the research results reach practitioners, administrators, policymakers, and scholars of adult education through print, electronic, and face-to-face communication. NCSALL publishes research reports, occasional papers, research briefs, and teaching and training materials; the quarterly journal *Focus on Basics*; and *The Annual Review of Adult Learning and Literacy*, a scholarly review of major issues, current research, and best practices.

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