This introductory chapter reflects on the effects of narrowing research agendas and raises questions about how academic work and activism might be mutually beneficial.

Knowledge, Power, Hope: Activism, Research, and Social Justice

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The title of this issue, “Decentering the Ivory Tower of Academia,” draws attention to the fact that for some time universities have been regarded as the legitimate holders of knowledge, and that academic knowledge is, by definition, removed from the “real world.” One could argue that adult education has never fit into that mold because of its roots in emancipatory and democratic movements and its struggle for recognition as an academic discipline. Because of its history and position, adult education has been finding ways to build bridges between communities and “the academy” for a very long time. In recognition of this fact, Dianne Ramdeholl organized the opening panel of the 2012 Adult Education Research Conference (AERC) as an opportunity to hear from individuals who were committed to working with marginalized communities and populations. The speakers outlined how, as activists and academics, they have negotiated the chasms between communities and academic institutions. Panelists described what they value in each of these disparate locations and discussed the struggles and dilemmas that arose when they tried to democratize practices and to value diverse ways of knowing. This issue of New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education builds on that panel by including all of the speakers, plus several other adult educators committed to democratic practice. Each chapter grapples with some aspect of the complex and contested relationships between communities and the academy, reflecting on whose knowledge counts, and why this matters. The authors describe the vast chasms between activist and academic knowledges but also the fruitful interchanges that can occur, and what material, contextual, and conceptual conditions make it possible—or challenging—to build relationships based on genuine dialogue and mutual respect.
Why This Issue? Why Now?

We are living through an era in which education at all levels is being transformed. Educators are under pressure to abandon their vision for a more just and equitable world and to consider themselves primarily as technicians whose role is to train individuals to attain predictable, instrumental learning outcomes. These pressures are part of larger forces that have been occurring transnationally, changes that have been accompanied by a rigid insistence that education be based on “evidence-based” research. As many have argued, the move to evidence-based research reasserts a particular research paradigm and privileges very limited forms of evidence (Lather, 2004).

Educational researchers have been raising concerns about the limits of positivist research for some time; its proscription against “untestable explanations” not only constrains “critical educational thought” but also privileges the status quo (Belzer & St. Clair, 2005, p. 1408). Some scholars understand current trends in policy making as related to the commodification of education (Arvast, 2006; Hamilton, 2012; Tusting, 2012) arising from the intensification of capitalism (Allman, 1999; Beach, 2003; Tikly, 2009). Others note how these changes are reinstating historical patterns of dominance (Bannerji, 2005; Castro-Gómez, 2007; Hernandez-Zamora, 2010; Ng & Shan, 2010; Ntiri, 2009). For still others, these changes have emerged from a complex of relations and discourses and are connected to forms of governance that produce particular subjectivities (Fejes & Nicoll, 2008; Fendler, 1998; Peters, Besley, Olssen, Maurer, & Weber, 2009; Popkewitz, 2012). No matter how we understand the reasons for the move to market managerialism in education policy and research, the increased emphasis on evidence-based policy is affecting research, frontline practice, and community–university partnerships. Many educators feel their teaching work is less important than the statistical reports and test results they are expected to produce. These trends are diametrically opposed to the emancipatory, liberatory, or democratic education valued by the authors in this issue. But these activists do not bemoan the limits that exist in the current context. Instead, each chapter explores different facets of the imbalances of power in relationships between communities and academia.

The Case of Adult Literacy. To begin the discussion I will briefly describe how these dilemmas have manifested in adult literacy in Canada, a field in which I have close to three decades of experience. Literacy educators work with the most disadvantaged and marginalized populations; adults who struggle with print tend to be low-income people who have had limited access to education or those whose literacy practices (Street, 2003) are furthest from the norms reflected in the school system. As in the United States, adult literacy has always received substantially fewer resources and supports than any other level of education, and many literacy instructors work part-time for very low pay. Over the past few decades adult literacy work has been transformed by educational statistics.
In many advanced liberal nations in the Global North, current adult literacy policies are guided by a narrow form of evidence developed in the United States. In 1989 the National Center for Education Statistics in the United States contracted Educational Testing Services (ETS) to develop and conduct a large-scale assessment. The National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) used a psychometric approach that built on previous ETS work to quantify the skills of youth and the “literacy proficiencies of job seekers” (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 2002, p. 2). The NALS framing was extended to an international level when the Department of Education pressured the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to undertake transnational comparisons that could “help assess the USA’s position on the international market” (Cussó & D’Amico, 2005, p. 206). The OECD undertook this work starting with the 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) which, according to its designers, offered data that countries could use to develop “lifelong learning, social and labour market policies” (OECD & Statistics Canada, 2000, p. xii).

Critics of these surveys argue that they project a mythical future and posit a universal form of information processing that disregards cultural differences and dismisses individuals’ actual uses of literacy (Gomez, 2000; Hamilton & Barton, 2000; Hautecoeur, 2000; Manesse, 2000). Policies based on survey data attempt to manage and standardize the work of community programs through extensive reporting (Hamilton, 2001; Hautecoeur, 1997; LoBianco & Wickert, 2001; Merrifield, 1997); these requirements leave many educators feeling that teaching is less important than producing numerical reports (Crooks et al., 2008; Jackson, 2005). Researchers in England and Canada have found that such accountability demands encourage programs to work with those who can most quickly show progress rather than those facing the greatest barriers (Bathmaker, 2007; Hillier, 2009; Myers & de Broucker, 2006; Smythe, 2011; Veeman, Ward, & Walker, 2006); there is no doubt that the National Reporting System has had similar effects in the United States.

In Canada over the past decade, adult literacy research has become increasingly quantitative and divorced from context or questions arising from practice. One literature review found “a paucity of research on the reading behaviours, strategies and processes of adult literacy learners” (Campbell, 2003, p. 6). Another found that almost 40% of research “focuses on numerical descriptions and analysis of the Canadian population with respect to literacy” (Quigley, Folinsbee, & Kraglund-Gauthier, 2006, p. 16); the authors noted a lack of research on “the lived experiences of adults with literacy challenges, on their learning experiences in programs or tutorial situations, on practitioners’ experiences, or on the everyday literacy practices of people with literacy challenges” (p. 26). But this has not always been the case. For about 15 years, between the late 1990s and 2009, adult literacy research was supported by a federal body that explicitly supported a community development approach (Hayes, 2009). Established in 1987, the role of the National Literacy
Secretariat (NLS) was to support work that “promote[d] the value of literacy and lifelong learning as primary forces for achieving personal well-being” (National Literacy Secretariat, 1996, p. 5). One mechanism for doing so was to “encourage, enhance, fund and commission literacy research” that would “promote collaboration between researchers, practitioners and learners” (National Literacy Secretariat, 1998, pp. 2–3). In that period Canada had “an international reputation for bringing research and practice together” (St. Clair, 2007, p. 63) because the NLS worked “to use research as a tool for community development—a way to get resources and knowledge to grassroots literacy programs” (p. 59).

I worked for 7 years as editor of Literacies, a national journal funded by the NLS that aimed to link research and practice. The journal was established following substantial groundwork that gathered information about reflective practice and research-in-practice (Horsman & Norton, 1999; Quigley & Norton, 2002), initiated practitioner research projects (Niks, Allen, Davies, McRae, & Nonesuch, 2003; Norton & Malicky, 2000), and brought together practitioner–researchers from across the country (Norton & Woodrow, 2001). This work relied on an expansive definition of research, one that included “all of the ways that people . . . look again, articulating and clarifying what they know, and pushing out into the unclear and the unknown” (Darville, 2003, p. 3). Some of this research was done autonomously in community programs, while some was done in partnership with independent researchers or with university faculty and students.

Research connected to practice can ask and explore questions that can strengthen programming and practice. While it flourished, practitioner research was exciting precisely because it asked fundamental questions, such as how to actively decolonize ways of understanding aboriginal literacies (Antone, Gamlin, & Provost-Turchetti, 2003; Balanoff & Chambers, 2005; Silver, Klyne, & Simard, 2003), how to address complex issues such as violence (Horsman, 1999; Norton, 2004) and homelessness (Trumpener, 1997), and why “nonacademic” outcomes are as significant as gains in “skills” (Battell, Gesser, Rose, Sawyer, & Twiss, 2004; Grieve 2003; Wrigley, 2005). Despite its richness, practitioner research has been described as “feral literature” because it is not necessarily widely disseminated and it can be difficult to locate (Horsman & Woodrow, 2006, p. 155).

A national project that was to guide a national framework for research in practice noted that “[a]dult literacy and basic upgrading suffers from a lack of recognition, minimal professional development opportunities, and insufficient funding supports” (Woodrow, 2006, p. 21). In their discussion of the United Kingdom, Scotland, and Ireland, Hamilton and Tett (2012) note that adult literacy educators are “used to working creatively ‘in the cracks,’ with inadequate funding or formal structures that support the understandings that they have gained from their experience about what good practice entails” (p. 51). Similar conditions prevail in most nations in the Global North. Given these
conditions, practitioner research would not be possible without critical supports such as resource centers, networks, or mentors. In Canada the research mentors were affiliated with universities and offered advice, training, and access to resources.

As editor of *Literacies* I knew that such mentorships could be challenging. In some cases community researchers were stung by what they perceived as condescension on the part of university researchers, and academics felt that educators misunderstood or belittled their work. At other times the material differences between literacy programs and universities became a source of tension: While academics are expected to do research, community programs often took on this work as a means to access additional revenue. Since these projects rarely allowed programs to hire more staff, practitioner research entailed further work for educators, leading to exhaustion and burnout. Now that I am immersed in the academic world, I am aware that as a graduate student I have access to many more resources and supports than I did as a worker in a community literacy program. I am extremely privileged to be a doctoral candidate, able to explore a range of perspectives on vital issues, and am reminded that the “ivory tower” remains one of the few spaces in which it is possible to consider broad questions that get pushed aside by the imperatives of practice.

Learning that the pervasive literacy statistics were developed out of a desire to link literacy to economic productivity and competitiveness has helped me make sense of why educators find it increasingly difficult to design programs that start from the lived experiences of the students who attend our programs. The next step for me is to find ways to share what I am learning with the field. As I make plans to do so I realize that what I have learned about the history of statistics may help to set the dilemmas of current practice in a larger context, but does not address the immediate needs of frontline educators. Every day literacy tutors, instructors, and program coordinators are forced to juggle the needs of flesh-and-blood individuals sitting in front of them and the punitive imperatives of contemporary policies. How can I share my findings in ways that won’t intensify their dilemmas? While I don’t have answers about exactly how my research might be useful, I am committed to doing research that can serve as a resource for strengthening the field and supporting the aspirations of those who are routinely excluded from education and from decision making on all levels. Some of my research has documented how educators work around the demands that force them to objectify the students in the classes they teach. Will publishing this information lead to policies that further tighten the noose on programs that are finding ways to preserve emancipatory values in today’s hostile environment? I can’t know the impact of all of my choices and actions. None of us can. What we can do is hold onto the principles that guide us and remember that our choices affect people’s lives and the future for us all.

**Power, Knowledge, and Justice.** The example of adult literacy work illustrates that differences between communities and the academy are both
material and epistemological. It is worth asking whose interests are served by these disparities. Universities have access to more resources, and are supported by more solid infrastructures than community programs or projects for equity and social justice. The relative stability and power of universities could be a resource for activists, yet very often the interest of the institution outweighs the potential to challenge the status quo. The effects of institutionalization and bureaucratization are a fruitful site for research. Critical reflections on the challenges in university–community partnerships could offer insights about how to proceed and how to transform the partnerships between these very different players. Several chapters in this issue do just that.

Community development approaches to practice and qualitative approaches to research allow for local relevance and evolving understandings. Positivist approaches, on the other hand, require an insistence on limiting what is relevant and focusing only on what can be tested. Past efforts to contest the role and position of academic knowledge have been connected to larger struggles for social justice and transformation. Some challenges have come from people demanding access to an institution that was, for too long, the preserve of White, middle-class men. Other demands have led to transformed research methods and new theoretical frameworks, some of which have meant that academic knowledge has become more relevant to communities. And yet much of what is considered legitimate knowledge continues to fall within the fold of Enlightenment thinking, and non-Eurocentric ways of thinking and knowing continue to be excluded as legitimate knowledge (Mignolo, 2013; Quijano, 2000).

Within communities and academia, some knowledge is more powerful than others, as has become clear with the move to evidence-based policies. Advocates of this approach cite its efficiency and effectiveness, and claim that the evidence offers useful outcomes. Its detractors, on the other hand, note that nothing is innocent. They decry the vast range of knowledge that it excludes, including those that center on issues of power and inequality such as emancipatory, feminist, and worker education. Paying attention to who holds knowledge, what knowledge carries weight, and what interests are served by particular forms of knowledge are important tools in struggles for social justice.

The chapters in this issue each grapple with some aspect of the rich and contested relationships between academic research and educational practice. The authors ask a range of questions including: What communities and experiences get included in, or excluded from, research? Whose knowledge is valued? How can those of us in the academy create and preserve space for diverse perspectives? How do issues of power manifest in attempts to build bridges beyond the ivory tower? Each chapter offers discussion of one facet of partnerships between communities and institutions of higher education. The chapters outline both the resulting challenges that arise and some strategies that were devised to address them. Throughout, the authors reflect on how such collaborations could be stronger and more effective.
We hope that this issue offers examples that will deepen our understanding of the possibilities of democratic practice within various facets of adult education, but also examples that will heighten recognition of the dilemmas and contradictions that arise when we try to work across differences in privilege. We hope that this issue encourages readers to find ways to link politics, experiences, and academic knowledges—and ways to foreground understandings that are routinely sidelined. We anticipate that the examples outlined in these chapters will inspire you to develop partnerships that are mutually enriching and that build on the unique strengths and resources of each partner. Most of all we hope that this issue of New Directions will support you in continuing to reflect on the implications and challenges of working at the intersections and edges of the academy and community.

**References**


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