Research Utilization in the Field of Adult Learning and Literacy: Lessons Learned by NCSALL About Connecting Practice, Policy, and Research

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Terminology Used in This Report

CONNECTING PRACTICE AND RESEARCH refers to efforts to engage practitioners in learning about research, considering its relevance to their work, and making and implementing changes in practice based on research.

CONNECTING POLICY AND RESEARCH refers to efforts to engage policymakers at the program, state, and national level in learning about research, considering its relevance to their goals, and making and implementing changes in policies based on research.

CONNECTING RESEARCHERS TO PRACTITIONERS refers to efforts to engage researchers in learning about and responding to the needs and working situations of practitioners.

DISSEMINATION refers to efforts to increase knowledge of and access to research, to getting the word out about research in a wide variety of accessible formats.

EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE: *The integration of professional wisdom with the best available empirical evidence in making decisions about how to deliver instruction.* (Grover Whitehurst, Director of Institute of Education Sciences, Student Achievement and School Accountability Conference, October 2002.)

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE:
- Scientifically based research from fields such as psychology, sociology, economics, and neuroscience, and especially from research in educational settings
- Empirical data on performance used to compare, evaluate, and monitor progress.

MATERIALS refers to primarily print-based (though Web-accessible) documents in two broad categories: (1) materials that report on research efforts, findings, and implications. These include research reports and briefs but also publications like *Focus of Basics* and the *Program Administrators Sourcebook* that "translate" research for particular audiences; (2) materials that are a guide to activities through which people engage with research, including study circle guides, training guides, and teaching materials.

POLICYMAKERS are those at the state and federal levels who set regulations and policies that guide the structure, funding and services provided in programs and states. (Program administrators also set local policy.)

PRACTITIONERS refers to people directly working in providing adult education including teachers, tutors, program directors, counselors and support staff. Professional developers might also be considered practitioners.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPERS are those who plan, conduct and/or evaluate learning activities for practitioners.

PROFESSIONAL WISDOM:
- The judgment that individuals acquire through experience
- Consensus views

Increased professional wisdom is reflected in numerous ways, including the effective identification and incorporation of local circumstances into instruction.

RESEARCHERS are those who plan, conduct, and report on empirical studies, evaluations, and research reviews about issues in adult basic education. (Practitioners also conduct research at times.)

SCIENTIFICALLY BASED RESEARCH involves *the application of rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to obtain reliable and valid knowledge relevant to education activities and programs… rigorous, systematic, objective, empirical, peer reviewed and relies on multiple measurements and observations, preferably through experimental or quasi-experimental methods.* (No Child Left Behind Act, 2001)

INTRODUCTION

Since 1996, the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) has conducted research on how to better serve and instruct adults with limited literacy and English language skills, and those without a high school diploma[1]. NCSALL dedicated almost 20% of its total funds to disseminating our own (and others') research. We took this approach based on the assumption that writing research reports that sit on the shelf is little better than not conducting the research at all. Instead, we wanted to invest energy and funds into ensuring that the research was accessible, understandable, and translatable to improvements in practice, and this required an initiative that reached out to practitioners and programs, figuratively and literally.

This report is a summary of what we, the staff of the NCSALL Dissemination Initiative, have learned about how to connect research, policy and practice in ways that promote evidence-based practice in the field of adult learning and literacy. The goals of our dissemination efforts over the past 10 years have been twofold:

1. To help adult basic, adult secondary, and ESOL practitioners use NCSALL's research findings to improve services and instruction for adult students.

2. To understand how best to disseminate research within the adult basic education system, a system with some unique features.

We have viewed our dissemination efforts as part of a larger research and development project about dissemination itself, addressing the question:

Given the national, state, program, and classroom structures of adult basic education, how can we best help practitioners and access, understand, judge and use research findings to improve the instruction and services that adult students receive?

We have learned, from NCSALL's research and development efforts, about the types of tools and structures that connect practice and research and policy and research. We have learned important lessons about how to promote evidence-based practice, and how to get practitioners to "engage" with research in the field of adult basic education where (according to Smith & Hofer, 2003):

- Most teachers come into the field with limited or no formal (graduate or undergraduate) preparation in how to teach adults;

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[1] We use the term "adult basic education" in this paper to refer to all adults with learning needs related to the basic skills of literacy, numeracy, and English language instruction.

- Most practitioners are working part-time in jobs that provide no (or limited) benefits, no paid prep time, and no paid professional development release time;

- Funding is year-to-year and unstable;

- Programs serve a wide range of adult student populations, with varying levels of literacy and divergent goals, needs, and barriers to participation;

- Funding in many states is stretched thin to serve as many students as possible at the least cost; and

- There is no national organization specifically for adult basic education teachers.

As we write this paper, the funding for NCSALL has ended, and so our research and development efforts to understand best practices and strategies for dissemination are concluding. It's time for us to record and document what we did, what we learned, what worked and what didn't work in connecting research and practice. We hope that others who work in the adult basic education field can benefit from what we have learned.

The audience for this paper is anyone who cares about helping practitioners and policymakers to *access, understand, judge* and *use* research findings as part of their evidence-based practice. That includes (or should include) future research centers or individual researchers, policymakers, state staff, professional developers, program administrators, teachers, volunteers, counselors, and others, including interested students. It includes anyone who is interested in how to help practitioners be aware of and receptive to the potential of research for answering questions, solving problems, or validating actions. It includes those who plan to promote change and improvement in adult basic education, who believe that everyone can look at research and learn from it, and who want practitioners and program administrators to *question* established or new practices, *consume* information about research, or *produce* research findings to add to the knowledge base in our field.

The audience for this paper includes policymakers at the national and state levels who are promoting evidence-based adult education practice: *the integration of professional wisdom with the best available empirical evidence in making decisions about instruction*.[2] If practitioners are to create evidence-based practices, they need to be able to understand the evidence that exists. This report represents *what we know* about bridging the gap between research, policy, and practice, based on existing evidence and on the professional wisdom we have acquired through 10 years of research and development work.

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[2] PowerPoint presentation by Grover Whitehurst, Director of the Institution of Education Sciences, October 2002, retrieved on June 19, 2007 from http://ies.ed.gov/director/ppt/2002_10.ppt#540,3,What is EBE?

In this paper, we first provide a brief overview of what we know about research utilization from the literature in K–12 and adult basic education. We provide a description of our Research and Development (R&D) work on dissemination, the story of what we have done to understand how to connect practice, policy, and research. We outline what we have learned about what works to help practitioners and programs engage with and use research to create evidence-based practice. We describe the tools we have developed that support dissemination activities that work. Finally, we discuss specific implications of lessons we have learned for practitioners, program administrators, professional developers, policymakers, state staff, and researchers, so that they can adopt good dissemination practices in their future change and improvement efforts.

Diffusing new ideas, practices, and policies in a field as diverse as adult education will never be easy. While some of the lessons presented here apply to any type of diffusion or dissemination, we are, in this report, just talking about what we have learned about disseminating research findings. However, we invite readers to consider how these lessons might apply to disseminating new methods of instruction, new technologies, new services, or new policies and requirements.

A Brief Review of Research Utilization

What do we already know about how to help researchers and teachers bridge the gap between research and practice? Research itself has attempted to answer this question. In one study, Zeuli and Tiezzi (1993) investigated teachers' perspectives about research and found that teachers generally have one of three different perspectives.

- *Research is **not** useful. Researchers don't understand my teaching context, and the only way to improve my teaching is through my own experience with students.*

- *Research **can be** useful, if it is presented in the form of specific and practical strategies, techniques, and approaches I can readily use in the classroom.*

- *Research **is** useful, but I don't need it to give me practical strategies. I want it to challenge my assumptions, expand my understanding, and help me build my theories about teaching.*

After asking teachers to identify which of these perspectives was closest to their own, Zeuli and Tiezzi discovered that the majority of teachers they interviewed (n=13) favored the "direct impact" perspective: that research can be useful if it provides practical strategies and techniques. The researchers found that a teacher's level of formal education was not related to the teacher's having one or another of these perspectives, but that teachers who had participated in some type of research themselves were more likely to view research as useful.

In a similar study, St. Clair, Chen, & Taylor (2003) surveyed 143 adult education teachers, tutors, and administrators about how they read and use research. The findings indicated that more experienced practitioners and those who had specific training or experience in conducting research were more likely to read and use research, but that level of formal education was "not a predictor of the use of research" (p. 8).

Garner, et al., (2001) reviewed the research base related to research utilization and concluded that teachers "scan the environment" (p. 8) for new ideas from the research and are more apt to apply its findings when they have a chance to discuss those findings and their implications with colleagues. Teachers also are more likely to use research to guide their instruction when they have opportunities for "sustained interactivity" with researchers—i.e., when they work closely with researchers and are treated as partners in, and not as "targets" of research (p. 8).

Our own evaluation of NCSALL's Practitioner Dissemination and Research Network confirms the importance of practitioners having opportunities to discuss research findings among themselves. We found that using study circles and practitioner research training as part of professional development to help teachers access, understand, judge, and use research was reported by practitioners to be more effective than simply hearing about or reading about research (Smith, et al., 2002).

A BRIEF HISTORY OF NCSALL'S DISSEMINATION INITIATIVE

Origins

NCSALL began with a strong commitment to practice and to using research to support and improve practice. Our work has included both research studies and support for efforts connecting research and practice. The initial grant application describes a "Practitioner Network for Dissemination" in which:

> Groups of practitioners linked to the Center's National Research Partnership institutions will participate in dissemination by learning about the results of research and development, conducting action research to apply these new theories, practices, and models, and then serving as practitioner experts who can further diffuse research results in their state (p. 105).

The proposal anticipated that the Network would begin with an action research project on the topic of assessment in Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia and practitioner research focused on one topic facilitated by the System for Adult Education Support (SABES), the state literacy resource center operated by World Education in Massachusetts.

Practitioner Dissemination and Research Network

With the inception of NCSALL in 1996, we met with an advisory group of practitioners. Based on their recommendations, we modified the plans for the Practitioner Network. Teams of practitioners from Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, and New England did conduct action research as part of NCSALL research studies. We also established the **Practitioner Dissemination and Research Network** (**PDRN**) as a distinct effort focused on connecting practitioners and research.

We invited state adult education directors in thirteen southeastern and New England states to identify a practitioner from their states to take part in the PDRN. We expected these Practitioner Leaders to:

- Disseminate information about NCSALL and its research projects
- Gather input about research issues from practitioners and communicate these issues to NCSALL
- Work with state professional development staff to plan activities to disseminate the results of NCSALL research
- Build a network of practitioner researchers within the state

The efforts of the Practitioner Leaders to disseminate information about NCSALL research through presentations at state conferences and articles in state newsletters was limited because NCSALL's research studies—most of which were three to five years in length—were just beginning. The Practitioner Leaders could only report on what was *expected to happen* rather than on research findings from completed studies. The number of research studies being conducted under NCSALL made it difficult for the Practitioner Leaders to be fully knowledgeable about what each study was designed to do. Therefore, we decided that conducting their own classroom research was an important activity to add to the Practitioner Leaders' job descriptions.

With NCSALL support and training, Practitioner Leaders (along with other practitioners from their states) conducted practitioner research on topics related to NCSALL's research studies. The practitioners shared their research reports not only with each other, but also with NCSALL researchers and other practitioners. By conducting their own research, the Practitioner Leaders better understood research as a process, the related NCSALL research, and the importance of research to improving practice. Their ability to talk effectively about research increased when they took part in their own research. NCSALL researchers who met with Practitioner Leaders to share research gained a new understanding and respect for the work and research projects of adult education practitioners.

As NCSALL reports and findings became available, we acted on an earlier suggestion from the Practitioner Leaders and developed a series of study circle guides that were based on the research. A study circle is a form of professional development in which groups of practitioners come together over multiple sessions to read and discuss articles or reports on research and to share ideas about how the research findings might be useful in their work. A few Practitioner Leaders developed their own study circles on topics of particular interest to their states. Practitioner Leaders worked with their states' professional development systems to organize study circles related to the topics and findings from NCSALL's research studies (e.g., Adult Student Persistence, Adult Multiple Intelligences, etc.).

With the PDRN, we based our dissemination efforts at the "grassroots," working with active practitioners whose task it was to connect with other practitioners in their states. As the first five years of NCSALL were ending in 2000, we worked with the Practitioner Leaders and state staff from the PDRN states to evaluate the work of the PDRN[3]. Based on the PDRN experience, we decided, in NCSALL's second five years (2001–2006), to start a new R&D effort to develop a national system for connecting research and practice for *all* adult basic education-related research, not just NCSALL's.

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[3] To learn more about the work of the PDRN, please see *Connecting Practitioners and Researchers: An Evaluation of NCSALL's Practitioner Dissemination and Research Network* at: http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/report22.pdf

Connecting Practice, Policy, and Research Initiative

Connecting Practice, Policy, and Research (**CPPR**) began as a NCSALL initiative in cooperation with the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL), the National Adult Education Professional Development Consortium (NAEPDC), and other organizations to develop a national system to strengthen the links between research, practice, and policy. Our goal was to build an infrastructure of policies and programs to provide practitioners as well as the policymakers with information about research and also to provide researchers with information from practitioners and policymakers that would inform decisions about future directions for research. As a result, we expected that:

- Practitioners in each state, as well as state and national policymakers, would have access to clear, user-friendly information about research related to adult literacy and learning

- Practitioners would be familiar with research and integrate research findings into their work

- Policymakers would be familiar with research and take it into account in making and implementing policy decisions

- Researchers would have input from practitioners and policymakers about the type and design of research that would solve practical problems of providing service and instruction to adult students

We found we were not able to develop the collaborations and resources needed to develop a *national* dissemination system. For example, we lacked the resources and federal approval for a plan to implement a national process of regularly reviewing research and making the results available to practitioners. Limited resources, barriers to cooperation across federal agencies, and effects of political pressure on policymakers became hurdles that stood in the way of implementing a true national system for connecting research, practice, and policy. However, we did collaborate with NAEPDC and NIFL to establish some elements of a national system, including a workshop on evidence-based practice, research presentations to the state directors, and research presentation "tracks" at the Commission on Adult Basic Education (COABE) and ProLiteracy Worldwide annual conferences.

When efforts to develop a national infrastructure connecting adult education research and practice were unsuccessful, we in NCSALL decided to focus our efforts at the state level. Our goal was to work with a limited number of "pilot" states and help state staff plan how to integrate research into their policy-setting and professional development systems. These CPPR initiatives were collaboratively planned in order to meet the states' particular needs and situations, and were jointly funded with NCSALL providing materials and staff time for development and training and with states supporting the participation of their practitioners. Several states were active in the CPPR

initiative, helping us to understand how to support states, programs, and practitioners to access, understand, judge, and use research findings to improve the quality of practice and policy.

Some examples of our work in connecting practice, policy, and research include:

- Louisiana: We trained practitioner facilitators to conduct a series of study circles. During the pilot, we conducted an evaluation of the study circle on reading research.

- New Mexico: We worked with the state professional development agency to sponsor a statewide mentor-teacher project using a guide developed in collaboration with NCSALL.

- Minnesota: We designed training to support practitioner research based on reading research, a training which is still used annually with groups of practitioners.

- California: We conducted a training of study circle facilitators that the state then adapted for its own use, and we then revised to make available from NCSALL. Over the course of three years, we also co-sponsored a National Adult Education Practitioner-Researcher Symposium with the California Department of Education, CALPRO, and other leadership agencies in California.

- Delaware: We met with program directors to plan ways they could share research findings with their teachers

- Texas: Together with the Texas Center for Adult Learning and Literacy, we trained a group of Texas program administrators to conduct study circles on student persistence that they then facilitated in their own programs and followed with action research on implementing changes suggested by the persistence research.

- Multi-state (California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and Wyoming): The Practitioner Knowledge project involved teachers in classroom implementation of research from the NCSALL English for Speakers of Other Languages Lab School at Portland State University.

All of these states supported the participation of practitioners from their states. These collaborative efforts with states provided opportunities for the NCSALL CPPR staff to develop and pilot new approaches and tools for connecting practice and research. Additional information on these materials and how to access them can be found in the Appendix.

As we worked with states between 2000 and 2006, we were reminded of the importance of the efforts of program administrators in bringing about change. We focused several efforts directly with program directors. In addition to our work in Delaware and Texas with program administrators, CPPR staff worked on a year-long

project with a group of program administrators from Georgia, Kentucky, and Tennessee to develop a "sourcebook" on NCSALL research, providing implications and strategies for implementation at the program level.

When we began our CPPR efforts, we envisioned a state process that would include a state advisory group and an ongoing process to consider research in setting policy and planning professional development. We learned that state adult education agencies have their own policy and planning processes and often did not have the resources or perhaps interest in adopting major changes. In some states, the CPPR worked more with individuals within agencies while in other states we have had an ongoing, though not formal, relationship with the agency. While the "tracks" left by CPPR are barely visible in a few of the states that collaborated in CPPR work, in others, we see continuation of practitioner research, study circles, and involvement with connecting practitioners with research. However, we still were reaching a limited number of states with the CPPR initiative. To reach more states and help them connect practice and research, we began a state outreach effort.

State Outreach

We expanded state outreach by adding an outreach coordinator to our staff. The role of this coordinator was to contact every state in the country to find out what they were doing in professional development and to offer them NCSALL resources and help in connecting research and practice, particularly through professional development activities. We systematically contacted every state's adult education and literacy offices to promote the use of the NCSALL dissemination tools (see Appendix). First, we researched the professional development system in each state, noting the current priorities and the elements of the system. We also identified the state professional associations, state-level newsletters, and other statewide literacy organizations. In the initial contact with the state professional developers, we explored ways that NCSALL's dissemination tools might support their current professional development efforts. Additionally, we offered to conduct trainings for study circle facilitators, initiate practitioner research efforts, and figure out other ways to build the capacity of the states to connect research and practice.

Some examples of our work in state outreach include:

- <u>Florida</u>: We supported the Florida Literacy Coalition to adapt the face-to-face version of the study circle on reading to a "blended learning" professional development activity where practitioners met together for the first session and then used online and telephone conferencing for the remaining sessions.
- <u>Georgia</u>: The state's professional development committee investigated the concepts of evidence-based practice, connecting research and practice, and the

research on professional development as part of its planning process for a professional development infrastructure.

- Indiana, Kentucky and Minnesota: We encouraged local and regional professional developers to use the training and teaching tools available from NCSALL in presentations to the states' cadres of trainers. These leaders developed action plans for next steps.

- Arizona, Illinois, Indiana, and Kentucky: Program administrators used the *Program Administrators' Sourcebook* as a resource in discussing how research might be used to change local program policies and practices.

- Ohio: Local program administrators investigated how study circles might promote the use of evidence-based practices.

- Colorado, Hawaii, and Nevada: NCSALL staff provided consultation support on using the study circle facilitators' guides as state professional developers prepared to lead study circles.

- New York, Oregon, and Massachusetts: Presentations on the use of the facilitators' guides for study circles prompted professional developers to host study circles on reading, student persistence, health literacy, and other topics.

- Arizona: State leadership envisioned a state institute for local program directors and GED examiners on the GED Impact Study. Through a series of sessions, NCSALL's director and state outreach coordinator presented a synthesis of the NCSALL research and its implications for local policymakers, and discussed how the study circles support connecting practice, policy, and research.

We also expanded our outreach by revising and expanding the NCSALL Web site. The site originally provided information on NCSALL and its research, links to other adult education sites, and downloadable versions of NCSALL reports and briefs. The site—**www.ncsall.net**—now includes all of the issues of *Focus on Basics,* a quarterly journal for practitioners. The Connecting Practice, Policy, and Research section serves as a portal to training and teaching materials and special sections organized by topic and role in adult education, e.g. professional developer. Training materials include study circle guides and a training guide for practitioner research. Teaching materials provide lesson plans that teachers can use in classrooms to teach basic skills while simultaneously introducing adult students (and the teachers) to concepts and findings from research. One special section—Practitioner Knowledge, Practitioner Research—includes practitioners' writings on their experiences implementing evidence-based practices.

Summary

NCSALL has maintained a focus on connecting practice and research throughout its history. With the PDRN, we worked to build the skills of and connections between practitioners and researchers. With the CPPR initiative, we worked with state adult

education staff to plan ways to integrate research into their planning and professional development systems and activities. With our state outreach efforts, we have carried out targeted marketing of NCSALL's resources. Over the 10 years of our work, we have had direct contact with professional development staff in every state and worked in collaboration with 14 states through the PDRN and an additional 15 states through CPPR. We presented research session strands and sessions on connecting practice and research at the Commission on Adult Basic Education (COABE), American Association of Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE), ProLiteracy and the Adult Education Research Conference (AERC) conferences, as well as at several state and regional conferences. We have developed and made available a range of tools for use by others in their efforts to connect research and practice.

In the process, and because we spent 10 years researching how to connect research and practice, we learned a good deal about how to do this work in the field of adult learning and literacy. We discuss the "lessons learned" under the NCSALL dissemination initiative in the next section.

LESSONS WE HAVE LEARNED

Research and development means trial and error. We tried out new dissemination activities in our 10 years: some worked, some didn't. We learned from our successes and mistakes; we learned even more from the teachers, program administrators, professional developers and other state and national staff with whom we worked.

Our goal in this paper is to share these lessons so that future dissemination efforts in adult literacy will not have to start from scratch. Here are the five main lessons we learned about how to connect practice, policy, and research in this field. **Dissemination efforts must**…

- **Start with the practitioner**: Dissemination of research must start with a focus on practitioners and an understanding of how practitioners view research.

- **Aim to help practitioners adopt a different stance towards research**: The goal of dissemination is not just to help practitioners *access*, *understand*, *judge,* and *use* the findings of particular research, but also to help practitioners, over the long term, develop stances as *questioners*, *consumers*, or *producers* of research.

- **Use the right tools:** States, professional developers, and program administrators need a range of tools they can use to provide practitioners with opportunities to engage with research (access, understand, judge and use research). The dissemination tools that support the most change and provide the best chance of promoting evidence-based practice are those that are inquiry-based, encourage reflection, and create a community of practice.

- **Work at all levels over time**: Changes and improvement in practice and policy based on research take time, planning, and action at all levels—classroom, program, state, and national.

- **Keep an eye on the larger system**: Dissemination is just one piece of a larger system of connecting practice, policy, and research.

Lesson One: Start With the Practitioner

Dissemination must start with a focus on practitioners and an understanding of how practitioners view research.

Practitioners approach research from different perspectives. Not all practitioners believe that research can be useful to them; not all believe that research is valid. We found adult education practitioners we worked with recognized Zeuli's and Tiezzi's descriptions in themselves and their colleagues: some do not believe that research has much to offer; some

are interested in research if it includes practical strategies and techniques; and others seek research for its ability to help them develop theories and challenge their assumptions. If research disseminators begin with the idea that everyone either hates or loves research, it can lead them into dissemination activities based on the wrong assumptions. Although we want practitioners to be receptive to the value of research, we should start with the understanding that, whatever their current views of research, it is a legitimate one, and it is our efforts that must adapt to the practitioners, not the other way around.

Many practitioners expect research to give them "the answer." While we have met practitioners, professional developers, state staff, and policymakers in our dissemination work with all three perspectives (not useful, can be useful, is useful), perhaps the most common perspective among practitioners who have not previously been involved in or "engaged" with research is the belief that research **can be useful** *if* it provides concrete strategies. These practitioners want research findings to present "the" answer for a particular population of adult students, so there is a tendency to reject research that doesn't give a specific, concrete and actionable answer. Since research and researchers often do *not* provide one single answer but instead provide new hypotheses, theories, ways of looking at a problem, or broad strategies, research findings must either be "translated" by researchers or practitioners who propose or have applied strategies, techniques, or activities based on the research findings, *or* practitioners need to become convinced to adopt the third stance ("It is useful; I want theories.") and to learn how to develop strategies on their own after understanding the findings.

Practitioners use research for a variety of purposes. They may use it to:

- justify what they feel they are already doing well in their classrooms or programs and/or what they already know about best practices and theory

- moderately or dramatically improve current practices

- analyze and/or solve a problem

- uncover new and intriguing practices and ideas

- validate problems they face and assure themselves that others have similar issues and experiences

- strengthen funding proposals

- debunk anecdotal decision making

- implement a strategy that others have found effective.

Because there are multiple uses for research, disseminators may need multiple methods of determining *how* practitioners use research, not just *that* they use research.

How research is used is often influenced by perceptions of what funders want. Whether at the program level or the state level, adult education practitioners increasingly feel

pressured to demonstrate they are using "evidence-based practice." One response to this pressure is to scramble to find research findings that support what they are already doing in their classrooms or programs. For example, the current emphasis on improving reading skills and scores prompts them to seek research findings about that particular problem, even if their program data doesn't indicate that reading achievement is a problem.

<u>Practitioners are relieved and heartened to discover that using "evidence-based practice" does not mean basing practice solely on scientifically based research</u>. As we have introduced the terminology for "evidence-based practice" (see *Terminology*), practitioners become less intimidated when they shift their thinking about research from an assumption that everything they do has to be grounded in scientifically based research (of which there is little related to adult education) to making decisions about practice based on their knowledge of the evidence that does exist together with their own and others' professional wisdom about working with adult students. Where there is no existing evidence from K–12 or adult education about what to do, practitioners and programs are justified in using their own or others' professional wisdom or theories to guide decisions about instruction.

<u>Practitioners start by being interested in issues or problems they face in their work, *not* by being interested in research in general</u>. If practitioners seek information about a problem through the Internet, journals, or professional development, and they find research that informs that problem, this is the first step *(access)*. At that point, it is helpful if the information is accessible—not filled with jargon, academic language or indecipherable tables of statistical formula—and clearly describes the findings of the research *(understanding)*. If practitioners can participate in discussions with other teachers, through professional development or other learning activities, they can make decisions about the value of the research to them and their students, and thus become more comfortable with why research in general can provide useful information (*judging* and *using* research, adopting *questioner* or *consumer* stances). At this point, particularly if they participate in their own or others' research, or if they have access to other types of research dissemination tools, then they become interested in research in general (adopting *consumer* or *producer* stances). However, we have learned that starting off by trying to educate practitioners about research in general is less successful in helping practitioners to view research as useful.

Lesson Two: Aim to Help Practitioners Adopt a Different Stance Towards Research

The goal of dissemination is not just to help practitioners access, understand, judge, and use the findings of particular research, but also to help practitioners, over the long term, develop stances as questioners, consumers, or producers of research.

<u>Promoting research utilization means helping practitioners access, understand, judge and use research findings</u>. Too often, the only dissemination tools that researchers use to help practitioners learn about and engage with research are journal articles and conference presentations. This is even truer now that the No Child Left Behind legislation is promoting publication of research in peer-reviewed journals as a criterion of scientifically based research. We have learned that articles and conference presentations are not enough in adult basic education, because (a) practitioners have limited to no professional development release time to read journal articles or attend conferences (Wilson & Corbett, 2001); (b) research on professional development indicates that adult basic education practitioners have limited to no *formal* preparation in teaching adult students (Smith & Hofer, 2003), during which they might have become accustomed to reading research about teaching adults; and (c) research on professional development indicates that adult basic education teachers change more (acquire more knowledge, take more action) after participating in longer-term, high-quality professional development (Smith, et al., 2003). *Focus on Basics* (see box), a quarterly magazine for practitioners, is an attempt to change the nature of traditional journals for practitioners, by addressing the shortcomings typically found in such periodicals. Articles in *Focus on Basics* are fairly brief (since practitioners have limited time), are not filled with academic jargon (since practitioners often are not formally trained as researchers), and provide not just findings but theory and professional wisdom about what works and how.

> Example: *Focus on Basics*
> Magazines such as *Focus on Basics* include many of the features that make research accessible to adult basic education practitioners. *Focus on Basics* presents
> - best practices,
> - current research on adult learning and literacy, and
> - how research is used by adult basic education teachers, counselors, program administrators, and policymakers.
>
> The evaluation of *Focus on Basics* indicates that this assists practitioners to understand what the research says and means for them and the adult students with whom they work.

<u>Tools for helping practitioners learn about research should be tailored to their specific roles</u>. Learners, teachers, counselors, and program administrators, policymakers, and professional developers have different needs and play different roles in changing and improving practice, so the tools that researchers and research disseminators develop to help those in the field learn about research must meet their needs. Although NCSALL produced formal, technical reports and occasional papers, we recognized that not everyone wants to or has the time or background to read and learn from them. Often they are most useful for other researchers who want to know more in depth about how the research was conducted and what the data said. Therefore, we developed a variety of publications and professional development tools, each meant for a different audience in our field. Examples for various audiences are summarized in the table below. More detail on the tools is provided in the Appendix.

ROLE IN ADULT EDUCATION	TOOLS
Adult students, who are generally left out of research dissemination efforts	**Lessons** that help adult students understand research on reading and on the GED
Teachers, who usually want to solve a specific classroom problem or learn more about a topic	*Focus on Basics* articles for discussing practical implications of the research *Research Briefs* to reach practitioners who want a quick synopsis of a particular study **Self-study Modules** on our Web site for reading research, reflecting on its relation to practice, and focusing on trying out new strategies suggested by the research **Teaching Materials/Guidebooks** on how to use authentic materials in their classrooms or help support student engagement in learning
Program administrators and counselors, who need to think about the implications of research for program structure and services	**Sourcebook** that summarizes research and suggests implications and strategies for programs **Seminars** (3- to 4-hours) that program administrators can conduct themselves in their own programs to help staff read, understand, and plan to use the research on a particular topic
Professional developers, who need tools for training practitioners and helping them engage with research	**Newsletter articles** about research that reprinting in state newsletters **Study circle guides** for facilitating three-session 9–10 hour professional development activities where practitioners read and discuss the research, and plan to try out new strategies based on the research in their classrooms and programs **Practitioner research training guide** for a four-session, 24-hour training that introduces teachers and administrators to research on reading and then guides them through designing and conducting their own classroom- or program-based research project **Practitioner knowledge institute**, a multi-day learning session where researchers informed practitioners about the ESOL research studies; practitioners planned to try out new strategies in their classrooms; and then practitioners and researchers came back together to hear how these strategies actually worked for students
Policymakers, who feel pressed for time and need to hear the implications for national, state or local policies of research on a particular topic	*Focus on Policy*, a short magazine that summarizes all of the research from studies about the impact of the GED, together with the policy implications for funding and delivery
Researchers, who want to know the state of the art and the knowledge base on particular topics	*Review of Adult Learning and Literacy*, an annual volume of commissioned articles reviewing the K–12 and adult education research on key topics

<u>"Engaging" with research, not just accessing it, is an important step in helping practitioners to become questioners, consumers, and producers</u>.[4] By "engage," we mean not just knowing what the research says, but what the research means and implies for practice. These are the three stances that we hope evidence-based practitioners will adopt.

- **Questioners** adopt a stance that evidence should underlie practice. When hearing or reading of a new strategy or practice, these teachers ask, "Why should I use this technique or strategy, and what is the evidence or professional wisdom that supports it?"

- **Consumers** proactively seek out research evidence, believing that new evidence is critical to their work. They integrate this evidence with their own knowledge of students, and then change their practice accordingly.

- **Producers** are not only consumers but they also generate knowledge through classroom research, through co-research with university-based researchers, or by documenting how they implemented evidence-based practices.

Not all practitioners will ultimately see research as integral to their practice. We must accept that, at the very least, we can help these practitioners to *question* the practices and strategies they hear about at conferences, from colleagues, in journal articles, and in professional development. Those who work as teacher trainers, mentor teachers, coaches, or professional developers should be prepared to back up the strategies and practices they recommend by citing the empirical evidence and professional wisdom that support such practices.

Lesson Three: Use the Right Tools

States, professional developers and program administrators need a range of tools *they can use to provide practitioners with opportunities to engage with research (access, understand, judge and use research).*

<u>Researchers cannot be the sole disseminators of findings</u>. Those who want to promote evidence-based practices need a variety of such tools that they can use locally in program-based, regional, or statewide professional development activities. Even when researchers are effective disseminators of their findings through articles and conference presentations, researchers cannot hope to reach the thousands of practitioners, most of whom are part time, with information about their research. Dissemination must, of necessity, be only part of a researcher's task when conducting research. In addition, states cannot afford to pay for researchers or even trained professional developers to travel and present to all of their practitioners, and turnover of practitioners means that they would

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[4] From Bingman, M. & Smith, C. (2007). Professional development and evidence-based practice in adult education. In H. Beder & A. Belzer (Eds.), *Improving quality in adult education*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

need to return again and again to explain their findings to new teachers in the field. Due to the diverse and under-resourced nature of the adult basic education field, we have found that true dissemination calls for developing self-contained, *non-proprietary* professional development models and tools that local administrators, professional developers and state staff can use on their own to help practitioners learn about research.

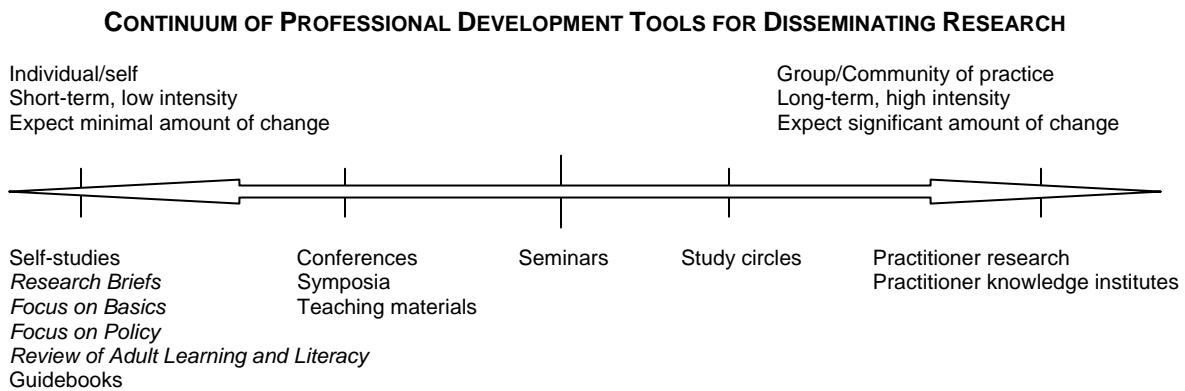Professional development activities are the main tools for helping practitioners learn about research. To understand, judge, and use research, many practitioners need interaction with others. They need an avenue for talking about the research findings, discussing with others (either face-to-face or via distance professional development) and analyzing the research findings to decide if they are valid in general and for the particular students with whom practitioners work. Talking and brainstorming with other teachers in study circles, seminars, symposia and institutes also makes it easier for practitioners to generate and plan to use specific classroom or program strategies, techniques or activities, based on the research. These professional development activities should focus on a particular issue or problem (teaching reading, addressing adult student persistence, etc.) and provide activities that help practitioners delve into particular research studies and findings (See Example: *Study Circles* in box).

Tools to help practitioners engage with research should be available in multiple modes to suit a variety of learning styles. We found that practitioners (and, by extension, professional developers) need a range of professional development tools and activities that fit their schedules, learning styles and desires for collegiality. The following figure demonstrates a continuum of professional development tools that are needed to suit practitioners who seek different levels of training intensity.

> Example: *Study Circles*
> We developed study circles, such as the *Research-based Adult Reading Instruction* study circle, to help practitioners engage with research. During this 10½-hour, three-session study circle, practitioners read about and discuss differing theories of the reading process, research about the four major components of reading and the implications for teaching, the development of learners' reading profiles, and the Equipped for the Future framework. In Louisiana, which has implemented study circles over the past four years, an evaluation of 24 reading study circle participants found that 23 gained knowledge from the study circle, and 19 took action to improve reading instructional practices, such as assessing reading component skills. Changes in teachers' knowledge and action were significant and sustained.

CONTINUUM OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TOOLS FOR DISSEMINATING RESEARCH

Individual/self	Group/Community of practice
Short-term, low intensity	Long-term, high intensity
Expect minimal amount of change	Expect significant amount of change

Self-studies	Conferences	Seminars	Study circles	Practitioner research
Research Briefs	Symposia			Practitioner knowledge institutes
Focus on Basics	Teaching materials			
Focus on Policy				
Review of Adult Learning and Literacy				
Guidebooks				

<u>Tools should use technology, where available, as a means to achieve interactivity between practitioners</u>. At a minimum, the professional development tools need to be available on the Internet, so that practitioners can access articles, reports, and teaching materials on their own, for free. Videoconferencing is another way to extend the reach of a conference of symposium. The best way, however, for practitioners to learn about research is by coming together in formal activities, such as study circles or practitioner research groups. But many practitioners work on their own or in rural areas where it is difficult to travel or find time to meet with other practitioners. Therefore, states and professional developers should make use of the variety of options for online or "blended" professional development, where practitioners meet face-to-face for one or more sessions and then "talk" together online or via conference call for other sessions. This drastically extends the reach of dissemination efforts, but it requires careful thought about how to organize and facilitate distance professional development activities.

<u>Dissemination tools must be high quality</u>. If the tools are to be used by others to facilitate professional development activities, professional development tools need to be self-explanatory and clear. A high level of detail, support (notes, materials, handouts, etc.), and consistency is important to facilitators who may be program administrators or lead teachers with limited time to prepare. While there may be some concern about preparing facilitator guidebooks that are so detailed they can be used as "scripts" when facilitators view the steps as requirements when conducting the study circle or training, our goal was to reach as many people as possible with information about research. We wanted teachers or administrators to use the Internet, find a study circle guide on their own, and decide to use it to help other teachers in their program understand research on a topic. We wanted as little "gate-keeping" as possible, and one form of gate-keeping is setting up a system where facilitators need to be "professionally" trained and certified by some higher authority. We are opposed to this "gate-keeping" for dissemination of research. But first-time facilitators who are not used to running study circles or practitioner research training need clear directions about how to organize and conduct professional development that is new to them. NCSALL tried to strike a balance in the professional development tools it created by providing complete and self-explanatory steps in all its guidebooks, while at the same time putting other ideas and suggestions for changing the steps in the margins,

so that facilitators could think about how they might adapt the professional development activities to their own and the participating teachers' styles and needs.

The dissemination tools that support the most change and have the best chance of promoting evidence-based practices are those that are inquiry-based, encourage reflection, and create communities of practice.

Practitioners value the support and "community" of others when they are in the process of understanding, judging and using research. After participating in study circles and practitioner research training that bring practitioners together to read about the research and plan how to try out new strategies in their classes or programs, practitioners told us in evaluations that it helps them to have colleagues to talk to about research. Participants liked and felt it was critical to create a "community of practice" through reflective discussions that are part of multi-session professional development activities on research topics. Practitioners who had the opportunity to discuss research with others felt they understood the research findings and could think of strategies that would work in their particular classrooms. States and programs should also make every attempt to find ways to keep people talking and sharing (face-to-face and virtually) on a long-term basis. When practitioners had multiple chances to come together and share what they had tried, that was even more rewarding and helpful in encouraging them to apply research to their practice. These opportunities might be program-based, perhaps with support from state staff in accessing new research. Or they might be state-wide using Web-based interchanges. State conferences provide another opportunity for participants to come together to share new knowledge developed through these long-term exchanges. While it is challenging and can be expensive to organize professional development activities over time, it is worth the expense to support practitioners not just to access and understand research, but also to judge, use and share their experiences over time with like-minded colleagues.

Involving researchers in these communities of practice is a good strategy. Connecting practitioners and researchers has a positive impact on practitioners and practice; connecting practitioners and researchers also has a positive impact on researchers and research. Practitioners see themselves as consumers and producers, and researchers understand how their research findings apply in practice. At the conclusion of the Northwest Practitioner Knowledge Institute, all the teachers who had visited the Portland State ESOL Lab School and learned about the Lab School's work from researchers reported instituting changes in their ESOL classes based on Lab School research and plan to continue these changed practices. The Lab School researchers, in turn, came to a different understanding of what their research findings really meant in practice, an understanding they reached by working closely with practitioners.

The more the professional development uses/promotes an inquiry stance, the more likely teachers will become questioners, consumers, and producers of research. Professional development based on inquiry (investigating a question or problem on your

own and with others) is critical to engaging practitioners with research. We feel that practitioner research is the strongest tool in terms of understanding research, building reflectivity, and developing leadership among practitioners in the field. Teachers who conducted practitioner research on reading described themselves as being "more intensive and thorough" in evaluating changes in their practices. The research process built skills that supported reflectivity. Whether or not these practitioners continue to do inquiry in their classroom or programs, they have a better understanding of how to question the research findings or suggested strategies that they hear from others, and they become much more informed consumers of research. This, we think, has a spillover effect onto their colleagues, who watch them conducting research and determining, with data, what works for the students.

Practitioners are effective at helping other practitioners learn about research. States, programs, and professional developers need to create and use ways to empower practitioners to be leaders and questioners, consumers, and/or producers. Practitioners can move to leadership roles through opportunities to facilitate a study circle or to participate in practitioner research. Many of NCSALL's research dissemination activities provided opportunities for practitioner leadership. For examples, we developed the study circles to be facilitated by practitioners, and we found teachers were able to use and adapt our guides to meet the needs of study circle participants. Participants as well as the facilitators in the study circles often went on to share what they learned both within their programs and in statewide gatherings. Activities such as study circles and practitioner research that ask for and value practitioners' experiences in the interpretation of research seem to build the willingness to encourage other practitioners to learn from research.

Lesson Four: Work at All Levels Over Time

Changes and improvement in practice and policy based on research takes time, planning and action at all levels—classroom, program, state, and national.

Change takes time. Although it seems simplistic to say, evidence-based practice doesn't happen overnight. Even initiatives lasting one year won't do it. For maximum impact, systemic change process needs to be intensive and long-term. That means that state staff, professional developers, and program administrators should utilize research as part of an on-going change initiative, not just as a series of interesting and new professional development activities. Practitioners need time to get comfortable with research on a particular topic, to decide what to adopt, to try out new strategies or techniques in their classes, and to hear from others what worked for them as well. An approach to research dissemination that truly encourages evidence-based practices can't use a menu-driven approach; rather, professional development activities should introduce research on a specific problem or issue that everyone at the classroom, program and state level recognizes and wants to solve.

<u>Influence and action must happen at all levels</u>. Tools are useful, but not sufficient. Instead, they need to fit into a change process at classroom, program, and state-levels simultaneously. Teacher change is necessary but not sufficient. Instead, state staff, professional developers, policymakers and program administrators need to understand the research as well, not just assume that it's for teachers. If policies at the program or state level need to be realigned in order to allow programs and practitioners to make needed changes, then that must happen at the same time. Efforts at the program level are supported when the state backs up the initiative with funding and policies. Efforts at the state level are supported when national initiatives and agencies back up the initiative with funding and technical assistance to states. There is value in having joint financial commitment: research disseminators provide materials, professional development tools and staff to train facilitators of professional development; states and programs pay for facilitators to provide the training and fund practitioners to attend it. A piecemeal approach won't result in significant changes at the classroom and student achievement levels.

<u>Start with where the state already is</u>. Needless to say (but we say it again since policymakers often forget this!), every state has a different professional development system and way of setting policy. The first step in assisting states to disseminate research and promote evidence-based practice is to learn about and consider current state policies and/or systems. Every state will take a slightly different path, using different levels of resources, philosophies, time, and people. The tools that will work for one state (such as study circles) may not be what will work in another state (which would rather have a practitioner knowledge institute). Whatever the state initiates will also be based on the particular problem or need that it is trying to affect, be that improving reading scores among adult students, promoting adult student persistence, or getting more GED graduates into postsecondary education. True change—and sustainability of that change—depends on writing research dissemination activities into the professional development plan. The professional development plan needs to be integrated, in turn, with an initiative at the state level to provide funding and structural policies that support evidence-based practices. These activities, however, must be uniquely suited to each state's history, personnel, philosophies and structures, rather than "imported" as is from another state or from the national initiative. And each state will need technical assistance based on this principle that supports them at the beginning and throughout the initiative.

Lesson Five: Keep an Eye on the Larger System

Dissemination is just one piece of a larger system of connecting practice, policy, and research.

<u>Dissemination is cyclical, not one directional</u>. During the past 10 years, those of us who have worked on NCSALL's dissemination efforts have had many long discussions about

the word "dissemination" itself. None of us has ever liked the connotation of the word that implies that research information goes *from* researchers *to* practitioners. That's why we shied away from giving the Connecting Practice, Policy, and Research initiative a name like "research to practice." Instead, we believe that all stakeholders—researchers, policy makers, state staff, professional developers, program administrators, practitioners *and* adult students—should play a role in setting the agenda for research. Research will be easier to integrate into evidence-based policy and practice if it comes from a real question in the field, a question that practitioners face every day. However, the adult learning and literacy field doesn't have a process for generating questions from the grassroots or for ensuring that such questions will be part of a broader, funded research agenda. We propose the following model of research dissemination, which includes how research questions and projects are generated:

THE CYCLICAL NATURE OF RESEARCH DISSEMINATION
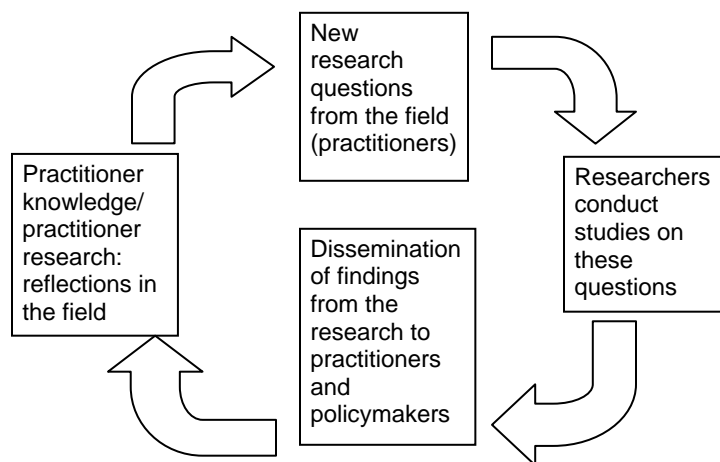
However, until national agencies and funders of research in the U.S. Department of Education understand the need for a system in our field to support research dissemination that is cyclical, we will continue to have research driven by agency—and administration—agenda.

A dissemination system should fund practitioners' involvement in research and understand that it requires care, thought, and resources. An important component of a true and cyclical system for connecting practice, policy, and research is connecting researchers and practitioners. Bringing practitioners into the research activities themselves is a powerful mechanism for doing this, as is choosing and funding researchers who themselves are former teachers or administrators in adult basic education, familiar with adult learning and literacy practice. From the initial meetings of the Practitioner Research and Dissemination Network, the NCSALL dissemination project worked to engage researchers with practitioners. The lead staff working on the dissemination project were researchers. Research symposia brought together researchers

and practitioners in the same conferences and often on the same panels. Researchers wrote for *Focus on Basics* as well as for academic journals. Individual researchers worked closely with practitioner researchers.

We feel strongly that every funded research project should not only have a thorough dissemination plan included as part of its required activities, but that the research should have funds to pay practitioners to work with researchers: as advisors, data collectors, analyzers, and co-researchers. In addition, every state should set aside funds to support practitioners to engage in classroom- or program-based research that can generate local practitioner knowledge, professional wisdom, and questions for further research. But we have found the work of engaging researchers with practice to be as least as challenging as our efforts to engage practitioners with research. While both share the same ultimate goal of education for adult learners, they do not share the same immediate work/career goals or culture, nor are they judged by the same standards. Researchers' interest in getting to the field may be tempered by their interests as academic researchers. They may be hesitant to publish articles for practitioners before they have published in journals reviewed by their peers. They may be reluctant to release findings "mid-stream" in a project. The language of research is often not the language of practice. Some researchers need encouragement to adjust their attitudes about the value of practitioners working in research projects. Similarly, practitioners can be nervous or even distrustful about working with researchers, fearing that researchers may be patronizing or out of touch with the real world of the classroom, and practitioners often need support over time to understand some of the specific constraints that research places on answering questions about practice.

We have found that such academic and practitioner expectations can interfere with connecting research and practice, but the expectations of policymakers regarding the role of researchers can also be a barrier. Policymakers are not always open to contributions from practitioners about research and a research agenda. Research will be easier to integrate into evidence-based policy and practice if it comes from a real question in the field, but the field doesn't have a process for questions to be translated into a research agenda.

The barriers to connecting practitioners and researchers in working together may be reduced by:

- Challenging academic institutions to give more credit to activities and publications that directly serve practitioners

- Funding researchers to involve practitioners in their research

- Funding and requiring dissemination to practitioners as part of research grants, and training researchers to understand their role in dissemination

- Funding researchers to form a network of researchers so they will influence each other about "tactics" for dissemination and about each other's research

- Funding practitioners to conduct their own research on topics related to academic research, and then share it with university-based researchers.

<u>The adult education field needs a dissemination system for all of the research that is conducted, not a little presentation money for individual researchers</u>. Researchers as presenters and disseminators are not always effective, particularly if the researcher is not familiar with presenting to practitioners. Researchers need training to understand their role in dissemination. A dissemination system for the field as a whole should also support and fund researchers (including practitioners engaged in research) to form a network where they can share dissemination "tactics" and tools in the same way that they share methods and ideas about each other's research. The system also needs some mechanism and personnel for creating new dissemination tools when new research findings emerge, for connecting practitioners and researchers, for translating questions of practice into research questions for a national research agenda, and for reaching out to state staff, professional developers and program administrators to help them integrate their local activities with the national system. In NCSALL, we did all of this for NCSALL's research. However, now that there is no adult education research center that serves the whole field, but rather individual research projects funded on specific topics, we need, more than ever, to look to our national institutions (National Institute for Literacy and U.S. Department of Adult Education and Literacy/Office of Vocational and Adult Education) to find ways to disseminate research on *all* topics to the field as a whole. Funding individual research projects is a barrier to collaborating to disseminate research, but even this could be overcome by a strong vision for connecting research, practice, and policy amongst those at the national level with the will and resources to help practitioners learn about research as part of every funded research initiative.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

We have found it valuable to separate out implications for action according to the various actors in our field, so that they can consider their particular roles in research dissemination and in connecting practice, policy, and research.

Program Directors

- Model how to access, understand, judge and use research in your own work and decisions.

- Advocate with your state adult education staff for a process to assure ongoing access to research at the program level.

- Bring problems that indicate a need for additional research to state staff for inclusion in a national adult education research agenda.

- Ask state staff to add information on new research to the agenda for their meetings with practitioners.

- Pass research information you receive on to the teachers in your program and discuss it with them.

- Collaborate with teachers and other staff in action planning around information from research.

- Plan a series of in-program study circles, seminars, etc. on research that addresses issues you face in your program.

Teachers and Tutors

- Read *Focus on Basics* articles and discuss them with your colleagues.

- Advocate for, lead, and/or participate in study circles and seminars as professional development options.

- Conduct your own practitioner research and share your results with others in your program or state.

- Ask your program administrator for funding for a classroom-based investigation on a specific topic.

- Suggest research agenda/questions to your program director or state staff.

- When reading research reports and articles, look for the research question first to see if it fits your teaching context, then read the executive summary to determine if the research addresses a problem of interest to you.

- Use NCSALL teaching materials *Beyond the GED* and *Understanding What Reading Is All About* with your classes.

- Share what you have learned from reading or doing research at staff meetings.

Professional Developers at the Program and State Levels

- Consider your state goals for professional development and find the relevant research.

- Include a mechanism for looking at the new research in adult education in your planning process for state professional development.

- Support local programs in using training and teaching tools developed by NCSALL and other research organizations that tie into program improvement goals.

- Build a "buzz" around the value of research, then sponsor practitioner research initiatives and have participating teachers present at state conferences, perhaps in conjunction with an academic researcher who has done work on the same topic.

State ABE Directors and Staff

- Integrate research into state policy planning and professional development in an ongoing way. Don't fund one-shot presentations by high-priced "research" celebrities.

- Base policy decisions on a careful review of current research.

- Be proactive in disseminating research to state staff and programs.

- Connect research to practice and policy based on state goals, plans, and issues.

- Write a mission/vision for the state ABE system that states that research will be used to improve the quality of programs and practices.

- Set expectations and mechanisms in place for consumption and utilization of research by state staff.

- Ask for more than citations of research in requests for proposals; expect proposals to explain how program aspects are determined and how they are based on research and professional wisdom.

- Develop ways program directors can talk with you about research; for example, at state or regional meetings or in an online discussion about what a particular research finding means for programs in your state.

Researchers

- When you start a research study, create a succinct description that can be disseminated to practitioners/policymakers to stimulate interest while your research is in progress. Begin with your research question and end with the potential implications of your work for policies and practices; talk about the types of decisions that might be affected by your research findings.

- Include a dissemination plan in your research proposal. Include funding for dissemination in your research budget. Including funding for practitioners to be involved in your research.

- When you publish the results of your research, consider publishing in a variety of publications—not just peer-refereed journals—to reach various audiences (teachers, program administrators, other researchers, etc.).

- Don't assume journal articles are the only format; the best dissemination effort for some audiences is not a research report.

- Information about methodology is not as important as findings and implications for practitioners.

- Create a dialog with consumers of research to identify practitioners' questions and consider a way to address these questions through your research.

- Create professional development activities by developing dissemination tools like study circles, seminar guides or articles for *Focus on Basics*. Collaborate with a professional developer if you need help.

National Policymakers

- Create and fund an infrastructure that gives state-level systems an opportunity to access, understand, judge, and use research.

- Expect that state systems will use research in their planning policy.

- Appreciate the role of research in expanding practices as well as for addressing particular problems.

- Dovetail research you commission with states' goals and connect to their goals for professional development and program improvement.

- Advocate for policy that increases the per student funding to the level that all teachers have paid prep time and paid professional development release time, so that they not only can attend professional development that disseminates research findings but they have time to plan changes in their instruction based on that research.

- Don't see the federal role as research gatekeeper; release reports on all federally funded research promptly.

- Ensure that there is a way for all research in the field to feed into policy at the national and state levels.

- Establish a process by which you—with state and local input—can establish, implement, and periodically update a field-based adult education research agenda.

Funders of Research

- Allocate funding in every research effort that supports the development and implementation of research dissemination tools for every audience.

- Require that research projects have a plan for dissemination that includes more than publishing journal articles and presenting at AERA or similar conferences.

- Limit funding of researcher presentations as a means of dissemination to practitioners. Personal appearances are of limited effectiveness in changing practices.

CONCLUSION

When we started NCSALL, we thought our biggest challenge in helping the field of adult learning and literacy to utilize research was in overcoming existing expectations about the value of research. At the beginning, it was very difficult to bring practitioners and researchers together, but we learned how to make it work effectively; it was also challenging to think of new avenues for helping practitioners become interested in research findings and their applicability to the real work of adult education practice. However, we would be naïve not to admit that the No Child Left Behind legislation, with its emphasis on evidence-based practices and on basing instructional decisions on research and not just on trial and error, gave a boost to NCSALL's efforts to disseminate research findings. Over the course of the past 10 years, we have witnessed a sea change in the demand for research findings, whether that came about from the pressure to demonstrate evidence-based practices in use or the desire to truly understand what research had to say about improving practices.

We hope this paper provides a readable and activating summary of what we have learned in trying to meet the field's demands for research information that they can use to help facilitate adult students' learning. It is not that we only want these lessons to be remembered in future efforts to help practitioners and programs utilize research. We were assisted immeasurably in learning these lessons by the hundreds of practitioners, professional developers, fellow researchers, state staff, and national policymakers who participated in our research and development efforts around dissemination, and we want their work to be remembered as well.

Finally, we hope that, someday, another adult education research center will be funded at the national level, and that the directors, researchers, and disseminators in that center will not have to start from scratch in considering how best to connect practice, policy, and research. For the benefit of adult students and their teachers, we hope this report is read.

APPENDIX: NCSALL TOOLS FOR CONNECTING PRACTICE, POLICY, AND RESEARCH

NAME OF TOOL	DESCRIPTION AND PROCESS	RATIONALE	WEB LINK
TOOLS THAT REPORT			
MAGAZINE FOR PRACTITIONERS *(Focus on Basics)*	Quarterly, 28–32 page magazine for practitioners; each issue is on a theme, presenting research findings and professional wisdom in articles written by teachers and researchers	Teachers and program administrators are not researchers. They need research and theory presented in non-jargon language. They want professional wisdom (best practices) that's been tried, written by their peers.	www.ncsall.net/?id=31
MAGAZINE FOR POLICYMAKERS *(Focus on Policy)*	Occasional, 16-page magazine for policymakers, on a theme, presenting research findings in articles written by researchers and policymakers.	Policymakers need short and focused overviews of the research on particular topics, accompanied by the implications of research for policy, presented in non-jargon language and with concrete recommendations.	www.ncsall.net/?id=32
SCHOLARLY ARTICLES *(Review of Adult Learning and Literacy)*	Annual volume of five to seven commissioned articles that cover major issues, latest research, and best practices in the field of adult learning and literacy	Researchers and scholars (including graduate students) in the adult education field need a book of record on key issues. Each article reviews the relevant research on a particular topic in both adult education *and* K–12 or other fields, and presents implications of the research for policy, practice, and future research.	www.ncsall.net/?id=493

NAME OF TOOL	DESCRIPTION AND PROCESS	RATIONALE	WEB LINK
RESEARCH REPORTS, OCCASIONAL PAPERS, AND RESEARCH BRIEFS	The findings of NCSALL research, presented in full report format and in one- to four-page summary briefs, so that practitioners and researchers can inspect the methodology, limitations, data, findings, conclusions, and implications of each research study. Occasional papers report on various aspects and implications of research.	Reports and papers provide the full description of a research project, useful for understanding the data behind findings and conclusions presented in briefs.	Research Reports: www.ncsall.net/?id=29 Occasional Papers: www.ncsall.net/?id=26 Research Briefs: www.ncsall.net/?id=27
UPDATES FOR STATE NEWSLETTERS	Quarterly, one-paragraph descriptions of (a) a new tool or product from NCSALL, and (b) a summary of findings from the newest research.	Practitioners in some states may have access only to their state newsletter. These updates are sent to state newsletter editors regularly, so that they may copy and paste them into their own newsletters, thereby providing practitioners with access to information about NCSALL products and research through their local publications.	
SUPPORT FOR STATE-LEVEL CONFERENCES AND MEETINGS	Multiple copies of NCSALL publications and flyers for conference packets and/or exhibits; occasional presentations by NCSALL researchers and/or outreach staff.	State-level conferences and meetings are times when practitioners across the state or region gather. Providing materials free to conference and meeting planners is a way to reach many practitioners at one time.	
CONFERENCE RESEARCH STRANDS	Series of concurrent sessions at national conferences where researchers share emerging findings and suggest implications for practice.	Conference strands create opportunities for practitioners to learn directly from researchers and hear about the emerging research. Also, researchers hear the immediate issues and concerns of practitioners.	

NAME OF TOOL	DESCRIPTION AND PROCESS	RATIONALE	WEB LINK
VIDEOS	Three, facilitated panel discussions in which a researcher and practitioners discuss research findings and their applications in practice.	The videos create opportunities for more practitioners to hear researchers and practitioners discuss research. These videos can also serve as a stimulus for discussions in seminars and study circles.	www.ncsall.net/?id=24
TOOLS FOR INTERACTION			
WEB SITE	Major areas of the Web site include: Research Publications Connecting Practice, Policy, and Research	Researcher, policymakers, professional developers, and practitioners can readily access NCSALL's research, publications, and dissemination efforts on the Web site. The site includes the tools in this table as well as interactive features to facilitate exploration and reflection. An example is *NCSALL by Role for Policymaker* at: www.ncsall.net/?id=761	www.ncsall.net Research: www.ncsall.net/?id=16 Publications: www.ncsall.net/?id=15 Connecting Practice, Policy, and Research: www.ncsall.net/?id=14
STUDY CIRCLE GUIDES	Step-by-step guides for facilitating three- or four-session, 9–10½ hour study circles for 8–12 practitioners. Practitioners read the relevant research articles and reports, discuss what these mean and how relevant the findings are to learners with whom they work, and make plans for applying the findings to their classrooms and programs.	Providing practitioners with the opportunity to reflect on and discuss the research is a meaningful way for them to engage with the research. The group component supports teachers by giving them the opportunity to share ideas with their colleagues. Practitioners leave with a plan for improving their instruction or program practices with evidence-based practices.	www.ncsall.net/?id=769

NAME OF TOOL	DESCRIPTION AND PROCESS	RATIONALE	WEB LINK
HEALTH LITERACY STUDY CIRCLE+ GUIDES	Step-by-step guides for facilitating five-session, 15-hour study circles for 8–12 practitioners. In the study circle, practitioners read the relevant research articles, review model lessons plans and try them out in their classrooms between sessions, and develop and share their own lesson plans.	Adult educators teach reading, writing, oral presentation, oral comprehension, and math skills—the same skills adults need to use health print materials, to apply basic math to health problems, and to engage in dialogue and discussion with health professionals. These study circles are designed to help teachers to teach these skills within a health literacy context.	www.ncsall.net/?id=769
SEMINAR GUIDES	Step-by-step guides for facilitating three- or four-hour workshops for up to 30 practitioners or policymakers	Professional developers and practitioners may find that shorter sessions fit better with the delivery of professional development in their states, such as half day meetings and conferences.	www.ncsall.net/?id=593
PRACTITIONER RESEARCH TRAINING	Step-by-step guides for facilitating a 4½ -day training for 8–12 practitioners. In the training, practitioners learn about the research on a particular topic, learn about how to conduct practitioner research, and are supported as they design and implement practitioner research projects in their own classrooms and to write up and share the findings of their research.	Practitioner research as staff development provides participants with the structure and the encouragement to systematically conduct inquiry about their teaching and learning, to reflect on the findings, and to make changes in their practices or programs. Essential to good professional practice is questioning what is happening in classrooms and programs, trying out new strategies and innovations, and making informed decisions for taking action in the future.	www.ncsall.net/?id=1143
FACILITATOR TRAINING GUIDES	One-day trainings for study circle facilitators.	While study circle guides are designed to stand alone, some states have found it helpful to provide training and orientation to new facilitators.	Study Circles: www.ncsall.net/?id=1137 Health Literacy Study Circles+: www.ncsall.net/?id=1169

NAME OF TOOL	DESCRIPTION AND PROCESS	RATIONALE	WEB LINK
MENTOR TEACHER GROUP GUIDE	Step-by-step guide for facilitating a 20-hour, four-session mentor teacher group for 5–6 practitioners. A mentor teacher group is a combination of a study circle and mentoring—an experienced teacher comes to participants' classrooms, observes their teaching, and provides feedback that helps the teachers apply those theories and strategies and learn from their own practices.	The mentor teacher group offers participants the opportunity to learn not only from the mentor teacher during the classroom observations but also from one another during the group meetings. Adding the individualized mentoring process to the study circle format supports teachers in integrating their learning directly and immediately into their own unique contexts.	www.ncsall.net/?id=1015
SELF-GUIDED LEARNING MODULES	Teachers, tutors, and others access Web-based studies that invite them to (1) read the related research, (2) reflect on this research and their practice, and (3) focus on an aspect of their practice.	The web-based modules increase access to research, while still using the inquiry-based model that incorporates reading the research and articles by practitioners and thinking about it in relation to their own contexts. Developed to meet the needs of isolated and/or part-time practitioners, they also offer alternatives to face-to-face sessions.	www.ncsall.net/?id=591
TEACHING MATERIALS	Guides for classroom activities that teachers can use to develop adult students' literacy skills and knowledge of research on a particular content.	Provides teachers/tutors with lesson plans and/or practical strategies for instruction that that are based on the research. Practitioners want to know what they can do and these materials provide them with models.	www.ncsall.net/?id=35

NAME OF TOOL	DESCRIPTION AND PROCESS	RATIONALE	WEB LINK
RESEARCH SYMPOSIA (Rutgers Invitational Symposia on Education, California Meeting of the Minds)	Designed to provide opportunities for adult education practitioners and researchers to share and discuss the most current research findings and practitioner wisdom. Sessions encourage practitioners and researchers to grapple with questions related to goals, accountability, and efficacy and efficiency in policy, practice, and research.	The symposia create forums for researchers and practitioners to interact in meaningful ways. They provide a mechanism for the research to practice and practice to research loop.	Rutgers: www.ncsall.net/?id=688 California: www.researchtopractice.org/
PRACTITIONER KNOWLEDGE INSTITUTE	Teachers learn about research from researchers, make a change in their own practice, document what happened when they made the change, and share this knowledge in final reports. They develop and document "practitioner knowledge" developed from learning about others' research.	The institute creates dialog between researchers and practitioners. Practitioners document their own learnings and share that information with others.	www.ncsall.net/?id=968
PROGRAM ADMINISTRATORS' SOURCEBOOK	Presents NCSALL's research findings in short sections related to key challenges that program administrators face in their work as managers of adult education programs. It also presents the implications of these research findings for program structure and services, as well as some strategies for implementing change based on these implications.	With a growing emphasis on "evidence-based practice" throughout the education field, and the need for resources to help program administrators use research to make decisions about the structure and services, the sourcebook is intended to be an easy reference tool to the NCSALL research that is framed from the administrator's perspective.	www.ncsall.net/?id=1035

NAME OF TOOL	DESCRIPTION AND PROCESS	RATIONALE	WEB LINK
INQUIRY GUIDE	Helps local adult education programs facilitate a systematic exploration of program performance. In this process, program staff take part in activities that involve them in identifying and clarifying program goals, examining current documentation processes, and addressing the challenges of performance accountability and outcomes documentation at the program level. They produce a number of documents that their programs can use (a) to make decisions about implementing ongoing improvement work and (b) to conduct this ongoing work.	The guide engages program staff in an action research project that leads to planning for program improvement.	www.ncsall.net/?id=902

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National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy

NCSALL's Mission

NCSALL's purpose is to improve practice in educational programs that serve adults with limited literacy and English language skills, and those without a high school diploma. NCSALL is meeting this purpose through basic and applied research, dissemination of research findings, and leadership within the field of adult learning and literacy.

NCSALL is a collaborative effort between the Harvard Graduate School of Education, World Education, The Center for Literacy Studies at The University of Tennessee, Rutgers University, and Portland State University. NCSALL is funded by the U.S. Department of Education through its Institute of Education Sciences (formerly Office of Educational Research and Improvement).

NCSALL's Research Projects

The goal of NCSALL's research is to provide information that is used to improve practice in programs that offer adult basic education, English for speakers of other languages, and adult secondary education services. In pursuit of this goal, NCSALL has undertaken research projects in four areas: (1) student persistence, (2) instructional practice and the teaching/learning interaction, (3) professional development, and (4) assessment.

NCSALL's Dissemination Initiative

NCSALL's dissemination initiative focuses on ensuring that practitioners, administrators, policymakers, and scholars of adult education can access, understand, judge and use research findings. NCSALL publishes *Focus on Basics,* a quarterly magazine for practitioners; *Focus on Policy,* a twice-yearly magazine for policymakers; *Review of Adult Learning and Literacy,* a scholarly review of major issues, current research, and best practices; and *NCSALL Reports* and *NCSALL Occasional Papers,* periodic publications of research reports and articles. In addition, NCSALL sponsors the Connecting Practice, Policy, and Research Initiative, designed to help practitioners and policymakers apply findings from research in their instructional settings and programs.

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www.ncsall.net