1

PM-1 3 1/2" x 4" PHOTOGRAPHIC MICROCOPY TARGET
NBS 1010a ANSI/ISO #2 EQUIVALENT

PRECISIONSM RESOLUTION TARGETS

**Older Adults, Literacy and Social Networks:
A Qualitative Inquiry into the Lives of Two Older Women**

by

TRUDY LOTHIAN, B.A. Hons.

**A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of**

Master of Arts

School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies

Carleton University

Ottawa, Ontario

December 16, 1996

©copyright

1996, Trudy Lothian

National Library
of Canada

Acquisitions and
Bibliographic Services Branch

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0N4

Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada

Direction des acquisitions et
des services bibliographiques

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa (Ontario)
K1A 0N4

Copyright - Votre référence

Copyright - Notre référence

The author has granted an irrevocable non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of his/her thesis by any means and in any form or format, making this thesis available to interested persons.

L'auteur a accordé une licence irrévocable et non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de sa thèse de quelque manière et sous quelque forme que ce soit pour mettre des exemplaires de cette thèse à la disposition des personnes intéressées.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in his/her thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without his/her permission.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège sa thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

ISBN 0-612-19475-2

Canada

Name TRUDY LUTHEAN

Dissertation Abstracts International is arranged by broad general subject categories. Please select the one subject which most nearly describes the content of your dissertation. Enter the corresponding four digit code in the spaces provided.

ADULT AND CONTINUING EDUCATION

SUBJECT TERM

0516 U-M-I

SUBJECT CODE

Subject Categories

THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

COMMUNICATIONS AND THE ARTS

Architecture 0729
Art History 0377
Cinema 0900
Dance 0378
Fine Arts 0357
Information Science 0723
Journalism 0391
Library Science 0399
Mass Communications 0708
Music 0413
Speech Communication 0459
Theater 0465

EDUCATION

General 0515
Administration 0514
Adult and Continuing 0516
Agricultural 0517
Art 0273
Bilingual and Multicultural 0282
Business 0688
Community College 0275
Curriculum and Instruction 0277
Early Childhood 0518
Elementary 0524
Finance 0277
Guidance and Counseling 0519
Health 0680
Higher 0745
History of 0520
Home Economics 0278
Industrial 0521
Language and Literature 0279
Mathematics 0280
Music 0522
Philosophy of 0998
Physical 0523

Psychology 0525
Reading 0535
Religious 0527
Sciences 0714
Secondary 0537
Social Sciences 0534
Sociology of 0341
Special 0529
Teacher Training 0530
Technology 0710
Tests and Measurements 0288
Vocational 0747

LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND LINGUISTICS

Language
General 0674
Ancient 0289
Linguistics 0290
Modern 0291
Literature
General 0401
Classical 0294
Comparative 0296
Medieval 0297
Modern 0298
African 0316
American 0591
Asian 0305
Canadian (English) 0352
Canadian (French) 0355
English 0593
Germanic 0311
Latin American 0312
Middle Eastern 0315
Romance 0317
Slavic and East European 0314

PHILOSOPHY, RELIGION AND THEOLOGY

Philosophy 421
Religion
General 0318
Biblical Studies 0320
Clergy 0319
History of 0321
Philosophy of 0322
Theology 0469

SOCIAL SCIENCES

American Studies 0323
Anthropology
Archaeology 0324
Cultural 0326
Physical 0327
Business Administration
General 0331
Accounting 0332
Banking 0333
Management 0454
Marketing 0338
Canadian Studies 0385
Economics
General 0501
Agricultural 0502
Commercial 0503
Finance 0508
History 0509
Labor 0510
Theory 0511
Economic Geography 0515
Demography 0516
History 0517
General 0518

Ancient 0325
Medieval 0326
Modern 0327
Black 0328
African 0329
Asia, Australia and Oceania 0334
Canadian 0335
European 0336
Latin American 0337
Middle Eastern 0338
United States 0339
History of Science 0340
Law
Political Science
General 0341
International Law 0342
Relations
Public Administration 0343
Research 0344
Social Work 0345
Technology
General 0346
Communication and Periodicals 0347
Ethnic and Racial Studies 0348
Industrial and Labor 0349
Relations 0350
Public and Social Welfare 0351
Social Structure and 0352
Development 0353
Theory and Methods 0354
Transportation 0355
Urban and Regional Planning 0356
Women and Men 0357

THE SCIENCES AND ENGINEERING

BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES

Agriculture
General 0473
Agronomy 0285
Animal Culture and 0475
Nutrition 0476
Animal Pathology 0478
Food Science and 0479
Technology 0480
Forestry and Wildlife 0817
Plant Culture 0777
Plant Pathology 0746
Range Management 0306
Wood Technology 0287
Biology
General 0308
Anatomy 0309
Biostatistics 0329
Botany 0333
Cell 0369
Ecology 0793
Entomology 0410
Genetics 0307
Limnology 0317
Microbiology 0416
Molecular 0433
Neuroscience 0821
Oceanography 0778
Physiology 0472
Radiation 0786
Veterinary Science 0760
Zoology
Biophysics
General 0786
Medical 0760

Geodesy 0472
Geology 0372
Geophysics 0373
Hydrology 0474
Mineralogy 0345
Paleobotany 0426
Paleoecology 0418
Paleontology 0985
Palynology 0427
Physical Geography 0428
Physical Oceanography 0429

HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES

Environmental Sciences 0268
Health Sciences
General 0566
Audiology 0306
Chemotherapy 0992
Dentistry 0567
Education 0350
Hospital Management 0769
Human Development 0758
Immunology 0982
Medicine and Surgery 0564
Mental Health 0347
Nursing 0569
Nutrition 0570
Obstetrics and Gynecology 0380
Occupational Health and 0354
Therapy 0381
Ophthalmology 0571
Pathology 0419
Pharmacology 0572
Pharmacy 0382
Physical Therapy 0573
Public Health 0574
Radiology 0575
Recreation 0576

Speech Pathology 0468
Toxicology 0383
Home Economics 0384

PHYSICAL SCIENCES

Pure Sciences
Chemistry
General 0485
Agricultural 0749
Analytical 0486
Biochemistry 0487
Inorganic 0488
Nuclear 0738
Organic 0489
Pharmaceutical 0490
Physical 0494
Polymer 0495
Radiation 0754
Mathematics
Physics
General 0605
Acoustics 0986
Astronomy and 0606
Astrophysics 0608
Atmospheric Science 0748
Atomic 0607
Electronics and Electricity 0798
Elementary Particles and 0759
High Energy 0609
Fluid and Plasma 0610
Molecular 0752
Nuclear 0756
Optics 0611
Radiation 0463
Solid State
Statistics

Applied Sciences
Applied Mechanics 0346
Computer Science 0984

Engineering
General 0519
Aerospace 0520
Agricultural 0521
Automotive 0522
Biomedical 0523
Chemical 0524
Civil 0525
Electronics and Electrical 0526
Heat and Thermodynamics 0527
Hydraulic 0528
Industrial 0529
Marine 0530
Materials Science 0531
Mechanical 0532
Metallurgy 0533
Mining 0534
Nuclear 0535
Packaging 0536
Petroleum 0537
Sanitary and Municipal 0538
Systems Science 0539
Cardiology 0540
Operations Research 0541
Plastics Technology 0542
Textile Technology 0543

PSYCHOLOGY

General 0621
Behavioral 0622
Clinical 0623
Developmental 0624
Experimental 0625
Industrial 0626
Personality 0627
Physiology 0628
Psychobiology 0629
Psychometrics 0630
Social 0631

The undersigned recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and

Research acceptance of the thesis

*"Older Adults, Literacy and Social Networks:
A Qualitative Inquiry into the Lives of Two Older Women"*

submitted by Trudy Lethian

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for

the degree of Master of Arts

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'J. Lethian', written over a horizontal line.

Thesis Supervisor

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Aviva Freedman', written over a horizontal line.

*Aviva Freedman
School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies*

Carleton University

January 17, 1997

Abstract

Most older Canadians (65+) have limited literacy skills. When younger, they may have relied upon others within their social networks to mediate their literacy needs. With advancing age, literate help may become less reliable as family and friends move away or die. The less literate senior may be left to function in a world of print for which she has little experience. Two older women attending a literacy program for seniors talked about their lifelong experiences outside of public practices of print. Through their stories I argue that dependency on others for literate help has negative consequences on one's self-image and ability to function in society. Although the full implications of literate dependence may not be realized until one's social network undergoes significant changes, these negative impacts are evident throughout adult life. The discussion draws upon discourses of literacy, education, and traditional roles in understanding the women's lives.

Acknowledgments

I wish to acknowledge the National Literacy Secretariat for funding the Senior's Literacy Project, Ivan Hale of One Voice -- Canadian Seniors Network, and Patti Martineau of Medicine Hat College. I also want to extend my appreciation to Helen Cantwell and Jean Dirk, who coordinated the program.

I am indebted to Mary and Fran for sharing their words and their worlds.

Stan Jones, my academic advisor, provided the opportunity for me to undertake this research. He saw the process through to completion and always believed that I could do it. His commitment to adult literacy has strengthened my own.

I will always be grateful to Karen MacKinnon, the graduate administrator, for her humour and understanding.

Without the unwavering love, support and encouragement of my parents, Jacqueline and Bill Lothian, I would never have gotten an education. They have brightened the lives of many individuals and have taught me to strive to do the same.

Cecil Collins did not live to see this thesis finished. He and Mabel Collins offered encouragement and shared with me their hopes for my future.

All my brothers and sisters have had faith in me throughout. I would like to thank Joanne and her husband Robert Mountford, Sandy, John, Laura, Leah (my kids' second mom) and Bill.

Joanne Abouchakra, Carol Gariepy, Constantine Ioannou, Maria Ioannou-Makrakis, Jaleh Nariman and Ann-Marie Turner, all encouraged and supported the telling of these stories.

I want to thank my sons, Brendan and Evan, for being born and interrupting the writing of this thesis.

Lastly my husband Robin Collins listened long after he should have been asleep and helped me focus when I needed to focus. His love, support and friendship will continually encourage my own journey towards independence.

For Mom & Dad

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgments	iii
Table of Contents	v
List of Tables	vii
List of Work Samples	vii
 Literacy for Older Adults	 1
Chapter 1: Older Adults and Literacy: A Literature Review	4
i. Conceptual Foundations	10
Defining and Measuring Older Adults	10
Conceptualizing Literacy	12
Defining and Measuring Literacy	16
ii. Literacy Levels Among Older Adults	20
Statistical Perspectives	20
Historical Perspectives	24
Contemporary Perspectives	26
iii. Factors Affecting Literacy Learning	29
Program Design and Setting	30
Cognitive, Physical and Sociocultural Considerations	31
iv. The Functions of Literacy Among Seniors	38
Reading Interests and Functions	40
Socio-cultural Contexts of Literacy Use	45
v. Summary	49
Chapter 2: Context, Development and Framework	52
i. The Pilot Evaluation	53
Evaluation Process	56
Program Participants	57
Summary	62
ii. Emergence of a Thesis	62
Conversations with Mary and Fran	63
Analytical Processes	66
Discourse Theory	70

Chapter 3: Mary and Fran	
i. Before the Senior's Literacy Program	74
Childhoods	74
Adulthoods	80
Widowhoods	85
ii. The Senior's Literacy Program	93
Year One in the Program	95
Into Year Two	110
Into Year Three	120
Chapter 4: Analysis and Interpretation	128
i. How did Mary and Fran reach late adulthood with limited literacy skills?	130
Childhood Experiences of School	132
Girls, Wives and Mothers	136
ii. Why did they join the Senior's Literacy Program now?	141
i. Desire for Independence	141
ii. An appropriate program was available	146
iii. What were the impacts of the program?	147
From Private to Public	148
Social Networks and Independence	152
iv. Literacy, Social Networks and Independence?	154
Chapter 5: Older Adults and Literacy: Research and Practice	158
Summary	161
References	162

List of Tables

Table 1: Distribution of literacy by age across the three scales, Canadian adults aged 16 and over	22
---	----

List of Work Samples

Work Sample A: My Loving Mother (Mary)	80
Work Sample B: Note of Appreciation (Mary)	102
Work Sample C: A Special Day in My Life (Fran)	103
Work Sample D: Coal Miner's Daughter (Fran)	104
Work Sample E: Banking Problem (Fran)	106
Work Sample F: Cheque (Fran)	107
Work Sample G: Withdrawal (Fran)	107
Work Sample H: Deposit (Fran)	107
Work Sample I: Story about Video Filming (Mary)	111
Work Sample J: Government Letter (Mary)	118
Work Sample K: The Dust Storms (Mary)	119

Literacy for Older Adults

A majority of older Canadians are severely restricted in what they can do independently with print. Over 1.6 million, or 53% of seniors (65+), might have problems reading labels on medicine bottles or looking something up in the yellow pages (Statistics Canada, 1996). A slightly greater proportion - 58% - might find filling out a bank deposit slip difficult. Relative to their numbers, older adults have lower levels of literacy than their younger counterparts. Of adults aged 26 to 45 not more than 14% are apt to have literacy levels as restrictive as today's seniors. In the 46 to 55 and 56 to 65 age ranges, the figures hover around 23% and 40% respectively. For the foreseeable future, literacy for seniors will remain an issue.

Dealing with written materials independently requires a foundation of knowledge and skill. Typically, this foundation is acquired through school and built upon through experience with a variety of texts in a variety of situations. Many older adults, however, have had limited opportunities to establish, let alone extend, such skills and knowledge. About 40% of Canadians over 65 have not completed primary school. This compares to 4% of Canadians aged 26 to 35 with this level of education. Of Canadians aged 56 to 65, just 13% have attended university, while 28% of those 36 to 45 and 22% of those 46 to 55 have done so (Statistics Canada, 1996). The patterns are consistent. Older adults have lower levels of literacy and education, and the most elderly are the least likely to have adequate levels of either.

War, the Depression and seasonal labour requirements often disrupted the early educational process for today's seniors. An economic base emphasizing agriculture and manual labour did not demand high levels of literacy from its workers (Statistics Canada, 1995). For women expected to live within private and domestic realms, education was at least as unnecessary (Chalmers, 1967). Moreover, non-use can result in gradual skill loss (Lothian, 1992a; One Voice, 1991; Statistics Canada, 1991a, 1995, 1996).

Given the large number of older adults with limited literacy skills, one might think gray hair would be somewhat common in adult literacy programs. This is not the case. Seniors comprise only two to three per cent of students in literacy programs (Community Literacy of Ontario, 1995; One Voice, 1991). It hardly seems alarmist when One Voice, a national advocacy organization for older Canadians, asserts that “the fight against illiteracy should be focused on the older population” (One Voice, 1991, p. 10).

This is particularly so as older adults are as capable of meaningful learning as any aged adult. “People who keep alert and intellectually active throughout life can expect little, if any, decline in intellectual ability” (Spencer, 1980, p. 74). This is not to say that changes will not occur. Processing speed, short-term memory and perceptual processing might not be what they once were, but abilities that depend on comprehension, social awareness or application of experience show little or no loss and even show gains (Spencer, 1980). Very recently, it was found that older adults could eliminate inappropriate sets of moves in a chess game *more* quickly than their younger adult opponents (Globe & Mail, November 11, 1996), but were less able to reconstruct the game from memory half an hour later.

Today’s seniors entered their adult years with skills they expected would suffice for the duration of their lives. Changing socio-economic structures have gradually outdated these skill sets. Those without the literacy skills needed to negotiate an increasingly complex literacy-based information society are left behind if alternative coping strategies are not secured. Today’s less literate seniors (as do less literate adults of any age) develop coping strategies that rely on oral communication, exceptional memory and avoidance of print (Askov & Forlizzi, 1989; Fingeret, 1983a; Freer, 1994; Lothian, 1993). They develop habits and routines that depend on persons within their inner social networks to mediate printed materials. Social networks are the connecting

links individuals have to one another (Rose, 1965). These links usually extend outward from the individual:

Social networks have two parts: the inner and the extended network. Inner network relationships are characterized by reciprocal exchange relations and often primarily include kin; extended networks include those with whom there is a consistent relationship but with a lesser degree of interdependence. Extended network relationships are rarely invoked for aid and may include employers or representatives of caretaker agencies. (Fingeret, 1983b, p. 159)

With advances in age, the less literate elderly may find that those who were once relied upon to mediate written materials - their inner networks - gradually die or move away. These seniors come face-to-face with a world of print that they had managed to circumvent for most of their lives. Now, they must navigate through print materials that are specific to this stage of life:

Illiteracy is crippling for an older adult who must cope with the changes that occur with the process of aging, including the loss of a spouse, relatives and friends, retirement, acquiring age-entitled benefits and health problems. (Jacobs, 1987, p. i)

Faced with such transitions, seniors may develop alternative coping strategies. The onus of literate help within their inner networks might shift from spouses to children (Lothian, 1992a, 1993) when possible. Where not possible, seniors may find themselves reaching into extended networks of professional and institutional help from support service fields (Freer, 1994; Lothian, 1992a; Ross, 1991; Spore & Pierce, 1980). For any Canadian adult to participate fully in social, economic and political life, some degree of autonomy with literacy skills is critical. For the elderly, literacy learning may be particularly poignant in so far as it has potential to help restore meaning at a time of life where established meaning-making mechanisms are dying, moving and changing.

Most working definitions of literacy emphasize this democratizing potential of participation in, and contribution to, society. The *International Adult Literacy Survey* (Statistics Canada, 1995) defines literacy as the ability to "use printed and written

Canadian data from the IALS (Statistics Canada, 1996) includes seniors up to the age of 90.

Chronological age has a psychological reality for many North Americans for it has empirical grounding in legal, workplace and governmental relations (Norland, 1991; Rose, 1965). Nevertheless, chronological age is probably the least reliable indicator of who is or is not old (Brockett, 1985; Fisher, 1988; Hiemstra, 1982). Weinstein Shr's (1995) review of the American literature notes that criteria for old age status in some ethnic groups might be the attainment of a life role (for example, becoming a grandparent). Rutherford's (1989) Canadian review defines older adults as "those persons age[d] 55 years and over who are no longer working at their major occupations or who consider themselves to be retired" (p. 1). The *Saskatchewan Older Adults Literacy Report* (Seniors Education Centre, 1992) distinguishes "older adult" from "senior" on the basis of retirement as well. The Senior's Literacy program also found that labour force participation warrants a distinct sub-group among older adults. In this study, at least three sub-groups emerged from that data (see Chapter 2) and while age is certainly reflective of these groups in so far as persons of different ages are more apt to be at different stages of life, it is fundamentally the student's learning goals in relation to perceived need for literacy help that distinguished one group from the next.

It is seldom clear in the research on seniors and literacy, whether, or to what extent, subjects might define themselves as old or older. If self-perception of age is a valid criterion (Coupland et al., 1993), then one's "functional" age surely influences this perception (Brockett, 1985; Heisel, 1985). Functional age relates to one's physical ability as well as one's attitude towards what can be done with the abilities one has. One may be 85 years old and have many physical limitations, but engagement in lifelong learning, positive attitudes and solid self esteem and independence of mind, if not body, all correlate strongly with higher or more satisfying levels of functioning (Brockett, 1985).

each did so with a view of their past and the present. Through conversation, Mary and Fran granted me entrance into their social worlds and trusted - in fact demanded - that I understand their participation in a literacy program for seniors from the personal, life-span frame of reference that they do.

Mary and Fran were the first two of ten senior literacy students interviewed as part of a nationally funded pilot literacy project designed specifically for older Canadians. Of the ten students, their stories were chosen as case studies because they were the first interviewed and their stories offered striking similarities and contrasts. Also, their learning in the Senior's Literacy Program could be traced over the duration of the three-year evaluation study.

The pilot literacy project involved training literate seniors to tutor their less literate peers. As it was the first program of its kind in Canada, it was evaluated for its effectiveness for students, its senior-specific training, and awareness of the issue. As a member of the evaluation team, the unique opportunity arose for me not only to enter into the lives of individuals who had already lived for five or more decades with limited literacy skills, but also to assess the impact that literacy learning at this stage of life might have. The results of the Senior's Literacy Program evaluation have furthered our general understanding of (among other things) sub-groups of seniors who might partake in such learning opportunities and how their learning goals may relate to life circumstance, the kinds of coping mechanisms less literate seniors have used throughout their lives and into older age, the life circumstances that might enable or thwart program participation, and of course, the impact that literacy learning might have for persons on the last band of life (Lothian & Jones, 1991; Lothian, 1992a, 1992b, 1993).

A detailed look at the particular lives of Mary and Fran does something more: it enables exploration into *how* limited literacy and literacy learning continually interrelate with existing coping mechanisms that are designed to circumvent engagement with written English. Stated differently, Mary's and Fran's stories reveal an intimate glimpse

into relationships between literacy (or lack of it) and changing social networks. And, they do so from the perspective of two literacy learners who are themselves looking back across mostly lived lives.

By necessity, this study, as other studies that look at literacy from the perspective of the learner or potential learner (e.g., Fingeret, 1983a; Fingeret & Danin, 1991; Horsman, 1990; O'Brien, 1989; Quigley, 1993) use qualitative research methods. With qualitative methods, the research task is approached with a view towards understanding and describing the topic of study as holistically and with as few presumptions as possible. Hypotheses emerge from analysis of the data and are continually and interactively tested and reformulated. Glense and Peshkin state it this way:

Qualitative research is evolutionary, with a problem statement, design and interpretations evolving and changing along the way....Hard-to-answer, context-bound questions emerge along with unexpected patterns and new understandings. (Glense & Peshkin, 1992, p. 6)

Chapter 3 discusses in greater detail how this framework was applied to this particular study.

The results of qualitative research can be “surprising” -- at least that is how Gillespie (1993) described Fingeret’s article on social networks and illiterate adults. Prior to the 1980s, enough adult literacy research characterized “illiterate adults [as] dependent and incompetent individuals” (Fingeret, 1983a, p. 133) that Fingeret was motivated to understand how and to what extent adult illiterates actually see themselves in this way. She found that:

Illiterate adults do not necessarily see themselves as dependent simply because they lack reading and writing skills. Many illiterate adults view reading and writing as only two of the many instrumental skills and knowledge resources that, combined, are required for daily life. (1983a, pp. 133-134)

More qualitative studies have emerged since Fingeret’s, although very few have made older adults their central area of inquiry. Askov and Forlizzi (1989) conducted

open-ended interviews with senior literacy students to assess the level of interest in computer-based literacy learning. As a preliminary phase of this study, the literacy behaviours, interests and needs of senior students were documented. Freer (1994), drawing on challenges posed by Fisher (1987, 1989) conducted open-ended interviews with ten older adults, six of whom were receiving instruction. He was specifically interested in how a lack of literacy might negatively affect older adults and how less literate seniors construct literacy in their daily lives. These studies are useful as far as they go; what they neglect to contextualize, however, is how literacy might be constructed for *and* by seniors continuously and interactively, throughout their lives, and not just at the margins. Community contexts, social networks and individual aspirations evolve and change. Understanding less literate seniors today requires some understanding of the life long experiences that engendered, perhaps blue-printed, present circumstances. Information of this type is limited. Furthermore, the interpretive framework of most studies is more apt to relate findings to McCluskey's (1971) educational needs for seniors¹ than to concepts of literacy as a social construction that enable, mediate, create and regulate behaviours through societal relations (Darville, 1989) with normative assumptions and practices (Fingeret & Danin, 1991). The field is new and parameters of inquiry, which are necessarily multidisciplinary, have not fully evolved. The literature review in Chapter 1 summarizes what we know and need to know about literacy for seniors from socio-historical, contemporary, and statistical perspectives.

Older adults' own voices become critical if we are to reach and teach this highly undereducated and under-served group of individuals. As lifelong routines of coping without independent access to print undergo transitions, can we challenge the argument that implies that literacy is one of many "reciprocal exchange relationships" --- on a par,

¹ McCluskey (1974) has made a "convincing case" of specific educational needs of the elderly. His categorization includes coping, influence, expressive, contributive and transcendence needs. See NACA Position Paper (1990), or Spencer (1980).

say, with cutting someone's hair in exchange for fixing a car? Is literate dependence on persons within one's inner social network a good thing, as Fingeret implies?

Individuals create social networks that are characterized by reciprocal exchange; networks offer access to most of the resources individuals require, so that it is unnecessary to develop every skill personally. Therefore, many illiterate adults see themselves as interdependent; they contribute a range of skills and knowledge other than reading and writing to their networks. (Fingeret 1983a, p. 134)

Mary's and Fran's stories are a challenge to the notion that even *interdependency*, where literacy is a commodity for exchange, is in the individual's best interest. Mary and Fran pose this challenge as competent older women who have lived lives dependent upon literate help, but also as women who have experienced transitions in the nature of that literate help. Their experiences of literacy and language learning within the Senior's Literacy Program illuminate how literacy instruction relates to how each woman sees herself and her literate help. This is a dynamic absent from Fingeret's work.

What began as evaluation research for a seniors-only literacy program expanded, for me, into a qualitative exploration into Mary's and Fran's lifelong experiences of, and participation in, literacy and the language of literacy (Chapter 3). Discourse theory (Chapter 2) provided a useful language and analytic framework. In harmonizing the inner perspectives of Mary's and Fran's personal stories with outer perspectives derived from adult literacy, gender, and discourse theories, we reach more deeply into what one might mean by the crippling effects of illiteracy and the democratizing benefits (and difficulties) of literacy and literacy learning. This discussion constitutes Chapter 4.

Chapter 1

Older Adults and Literacy: A Literature Review

The results of the pilot evaluation research project for the Senior's Literacy Program (Lothian & Jones, 1991; Lothian, 1992a, 1992b, 1993) add considerably to our knowledge of seniors' literacy. In an area where the quality of research has been characterized as "fragmented and contradictory" and terms like "limited" and "paucity" best describe its quantity, contributing something new is not difficult. Contributing something that furthers the framework of analysis is more difficult. There is little that is consistent among the studies that have been done.

Recent national and international adult literacy surveys (Statistics Canada, 1991a, 1995, 1996) have framed and socially-contextualized the roots and scope of restricted literacy skills among older Canadians. This work was sorely needed and should minimize the pervasive debate of how best to measure literacy levels among older adults (see Part ii, this chapter). What large scale surveys cannot do, however, is reveal how an individual experiences limited literacy skills in particular, or social policies and practices in general. Of the two and a half decades of research in seniors' literacy there is also little to offer in this regard. Few studies clearly use less literate elderly for informants and even fewer use qualitative methods to capture their perceptions, if not experiences (but see Askov & Forlizzi, 1989; Fisher, 1989, 1990; Freer, 1994; Heisel, 1985; Heisel & Larson, 1984; Kasworm, 1982; Lothian, 1992a, 1993, 1996; Spore, 1980; Spore & Pierce, 1980).² We are in a drafting stage with the vision barely framed. What has been learned from the Senior's Literacy Program has added a little more contour. Mary's and Fran's stories add some colour.

²Heisel and Larson (1984), Heisel, (1980) and Kasworm (1982) use both quantitative and qualitative methods.

This chapter takes a detailed look at what we know about seniors and literacy. It draws on statistical surveys and socio-historical data to frame and contextualize the issues. After reviewing general functions of reading among the elderly, the discussion turns specifically to what we can cull from these sources that is relevant for the less literate or undereducated senior. But first, we look at some of the conceptual foundations upon which much of this research is, or perhaps should be, based.

i. Conceptual Foundations

Defining and Measuring Older Adults

No one seems to agree on when old age begins. Aging is a birth-to-death process that varies considerably from one individual to the next. Coupland, Coupland & Giles (1991) view age as "socially constructed by particular communities for particular purposes" and "subjectively interpreted by individuals" (p. 7). Accordingly, health and well-being, attitude, education, family and friendship ties, socio-economic status and ethnicity are among the multiplicity of influences affecting how individuals perceive and live out the aging process.

The literature on seniors and literacy reflects these variables marginally and inconsistently. Chronological age is the threshold of choice for determining who counts as an "older adult" or "senior". Fisher (1990), for example, studied the functions of literacy in a nursing home with adults aged 65+. Other studies use age 60+ as the criterion for older adult (Freer, 1994; Kasworm, 1982). Lothian and Jones (1991) worked with literacy students and tutors in a program for adults 55 and older. The *Literacy Skills Used in Daily Activities* (Statistics Canada, 1991a) and the *International Adult Literacy Survey* (IALS, Statistics Canada, 1995) surveyed adults aged 56 to 69 and 56 to 65, respectively, an age range that ends where others think it should just begin.

Canadian data from the IALS (Statistics Canada, 1996) includes seniors up to the age of 90.

Chronological age has a psychological reality for many North Americans for it has empirical grounding in legal, workplace and governmental relations (Norland, 1991, Rose, 1965). Nevertheless, chronological age is probably the least reliable indicator of who is or is not old (Brockett, 1985, Fisher, 1988; Hiemstra, 1982). Weinstein Shr's (1995) review of the American literature notes that criteria for old age status in some ethnic groups might be the attainment of a life role (for example, becoming a grandparent). Rutherford's (1989) Canadian review defines older adults as "those persons age[d] 55 years and over who are no longer working at their major occupations or who consider themselves to be retired" (p. 1). The *Saskatchewan Older Adults Literacy Report* (Seniors Education Centre, 1992) distinguishes "older adult" from "senior" on the basis of retirement as well. The Senior's Literacy program also found that labour force participation warrants a distinct sub-group among older adults. In this study, at least three sub-groups emerged from that data (see Chapter 2) and while age is certainly reflective of these groups in so far as persons of different ages are more apt to be at different stages of life, it is fundamentally the student's learning goals in relation to perceived need for literacy help that distinguished one group from the next.

It is seldom clear in the research on seniors and literacy, whether, or to what extent, subjects might define themselves as old or older. If self-perception of age is a valid criterion (Coupland et al., 1993), then one's "functional" age surely influences this perception (Brockett, 1985; Heisel, 1985). Functional age relates to one's physical ability as well as one's attitude towards what can be done with the abilities one has. One may be 85 years old and have many physical limitations, but engagement in lifelong learning, positive attitudes and solid self esteem and independence of mind, if not body, all correlate strongly with higher or more satisfying levels of functioning (Brockett, 1985).

It seems self evident that education acts as a stimulus to the individual's capabilities and that the exercise of these capabilities is likely to maintain, and even increase, their functional effectiveness. Conversely, the failure to use one's intellectual capacities on a regular and extensive basis may lead to a sort of intellectual atrophy and rapid deterioration of the ability to perform even elementary tasks (Granick & Friedman, 1973, p. 63 as cited in Heisel, 1985, p. 1)

Educational gerontologists seem primarily concerned with avoiding intellectual atrophy. Either implicitly or explicitly they define aging in terms of loss:

The aging process brings with it the loss of employment through retirement, the loss of significant others through death and relocation, the gradual loss of mobility, and the loss of time-structuring mechanisms. These take away those persons and routines upon which effective coping is most often based. (Fisher, 1987, p. 47)

Such notions risk viewing language and literacy learning as little more than a means of passing time and postponing the inevitable decline of the mind and body and social contacts.³ Defining old age solely in terms of what is lost, and not what is gained; what is changed, without regard to what is continued, relegates the elderly to a kind of purgatory before the final blow. A forward-looking, humanistic view of the aging process incorporates both changes and continuities:

There is only one solution if old age is not to be an absurd parody of our former life, and that is to go on pursuing ends that give our essence a meaningful devotion to individuals, to groups, or to causes, social, political intellectual or creative work. (de Beauvoir, 1970, p. 540 as cited in Weinstein-Shr, 1995, p. 24)

Conceptualizing Literacy

Literacy, like age, is also a social construction. Each social label comes accompanied by sets of assumptions and connotations generally shared by members in a

³ Studies suggest that the mind, while it may slow down along with the rest of the body, does not drastically decline in its ability to function in otherwise healthy people until about six months before death (Smith, 1993)

given society.⁴ As individuals, part of how we see ourselves, our subjective sense of ourselves, is shaped by the standards assumed in these social labels or discourses at the same time that we help shape the standards. Thus, no matter how insidiously the media tries to show us how we should be for our age, we still find ourselves asking, ‘Am I normal for my age in relation to others my age?’ This section looks briefly at four philosophical conceptions of literacy - literacy as grace, as function, as socio-cultural practices, and as power (Darville, 1989; Fingeret & Danin, 1991; Scribner, 1984). Each concept may be seen as encompassing a particular discourse, or set of assumptions, that its users may or may not make explicit.

Literacy as Grace

Literacy as a state of grace (Scribner, 1984), or the classical view of literacy (de Castell et al., 1986) embraces the domain of high culture and an elite lettered class. Members of this social group, and social views of members of this group, link literacy with an aesthetic appreciation of the intrinsic worth of the written word. This belief holds that participation in a “bookish tradition, enlarges and develops a person’s essential self” (Scribner, 1984, p. 13). Seen as a state of grace...

...the literate individual’s life derives its meaning and significance from intellectual, aesthetic and spiritual participation in the accumulated creations and knowledge of humankind, made available through the written word. (Scribner, 1984, p. 14)

As Norman and Malicky (1986) note, this view’s “focus is as much on how the individual views himself/herself, as on how he/she views the world” (p. 12).

Most of the literature on seniors and literacy is cognitively or psychologically oriented. Findings on the benefits of reading are typically interpreted within constructs of those disciplines. The notion of literacy as grace, however, seems tacit within many studies as researchers talk about the “expressive” (e.g. Hiemstra, 1976) needs that reading

⁴ See Chapter 2, Part iii, for a fuller explication of my understanding of discourse theory

fulfills, and about reading's power as a vehicle for self-renewal and self-actualization (e.g. Gentile & McMillan, 1979).

Functional Literacy

In this view literacy is the "ability to independently and successfully accomplish specific tasks such as filling in forms, pulling information from newspaper ads, or addressing an envelope" (Fingeret & Danin, 1991, p. 2). Functional literacy concerns itself with survival skills needed for coping in today's society. By definition, what is functional for survival can only be known in light of the print demands placed upon individuals in relation to their resources for meeting them within specific situations. Nevertheless, functional literacy as it is normally conceived, focusses on literacy demands of society's mainstream. Functional definitions have come under much scrutiny from those who question assumptions about *whose* survival literacy skills matter (Cervero, 1985, Scribner, 1984). In relation to older adults, the question often asked is whether the forms, newspapers and information they need in order to survive actually differs from what younger adults may need (Fisher, 1987). Rigg and Kazemek (1983) question whether functional literacy is or should be the prevalent issue the literature suggests it is among older adults who may already have many coping mechanisms and may prefer to seek expressive ends towards learning. Again, within the literature, the terms "coping" or "instrumental" capture what literacy theorists might describe as functional.

Literacy as Sociocultural Practices

In partial reaction to discussions about literacy as an "autonomous" entity (Street, 1989) divorced from actual uses, or functional literacy localized in those literacy practices needed for participation in the mainstream of society, the concept of literacy as socio-cultural practices seeks to understand the various roles and perceptions of literacy

that actually play out within specific contexts among specific social groups of people (cf. Cervero, 1985; Heath, 1986; Szwed, 1988). "Practices imply a [dynamic] relationship between the persons, the situation and the resources available" (Fingeret & Danin, 1991, p. 2). Literacies needed to mediate dominant forms of print are but one realm of the socio-cultural practices of literacy. Reading and discussing Shakespeare is another. Who engages in what kinds of literacy events,⁵ and for what purposes and in what ways sets this view off from the others. Researchers viewing literacy within each setting seek to understand its role in that setting. Literate behaviours, perceptions, functions and uses of texts within specific community or cultural contexts, vary. Indeed, not all social groups and their members will necessarily want or need to learn the bureaucratic forms of language associated with functional literacy (Cervero, 1985; Fingeret, 1983; Fisher, 1990; Heath, 1988). Differences between the practices of literacy as demanded by dominant social groups and other, less powerful social groups might best be seen as a "clash of competing value positions, ideologies and power structures" (Cervero, 1985, p. 9).

Only Fisher (1990), Freer (1994), Lothian (1996) and by inference, Askov and Forlizzi (1989) have attempted to look at the reading and writing behaviour, interests and needs of older adults within particular community contexts. It is precisely in this area of socio-cultural investigation that Weinstein-Shr (1995) deplores the "virtually non-existent" state of knowledge.

Literacy as power

Literacy as voice (Darville, 1989, 1994) speaks to literacy as power (Scribner, 1984) or empowerment (Giroux, 1988). It emphasizes a political relationship between "literacy and individual or group or community advancement" (Scribner, 1984, p. 11). In this view, literacy learning emphasizes:

⁵Heath (1988) uses the term literate event to indicate any exchange or action resulting from the use of print

critical reflection and action in which literacy is seen as a means for adults to challenge conventional wisdom, the myths and assumptions underlying their beliefs and perceptions, for the purpose of changing their relationship to the social structures. (Fingeret & Danin, 1991, p. 2)

By fostering the development of voice, literacy as power enables democratization through the literacy learning process. It is said to enable the “poor and politically powerless [to] claim their place in the world” (Scribner, 1984, pp. 11-12.). Some of the literature notes that seniors desire some degree of independence through literacy learning (e.g. Askov & Forlizzi, 1989; Jacobs, 1987, 1990; Spore & Pierce, 1980), but again, not one study has actually explored in detail what this means within the context of the senior’s life (but see, Lothian, 1992a, 1993). This is a central objective of this thesis.

Notions of reading or literacy within the body of research called “seniors and literacy” tend to emanate from cognitively oriented studies and use constructs of that discipline to frame their interpretations. Rather than understanding the perceptions and behaviours and literacy needs of less literate or under-educated seniors in light of the social relations and practices of literacy, these studies, instead, examine educational and individualized functions, goals and benefits of reading. Conversely, while there may be an educational aspect subsumed by the concepts articulated by sociologists, anthropologists, and policy makers, what “literacy as education” actually means to learners themselves is often lacking (Norman & Malicky, 1986; Quigley, 1993).

Defining and Measuring Literacy

As society continues to move from an economic base of industry to one of information, new literacy demands are placed on individuals, and the criteria for what is needed to participate fully in the mainstream of society change accordingly. The search for accurate measurements to assess who can and who cannot meet these criteria follow

suit. Thus, while writing one's name may have once been a sufficient indicator of literacy, before long, it became inadequate. One of UNESCO's earlier definitions, namely, "A person is literate who can with understanding both read and write a short simple statement on his everyday life" became equally outdated (cited in Rutherford, 1989, p. 1).

Working definitions of literacy have traditionally posed an artificial standard, or cut-off point for who is or is not literate. The typical indicator for who falls on either side of the divide has either been highest level of schooling attained or performance on standardized tests (Resnick & Resnick, 1977; Statistics Canada, 1995; Thomas, 1989). In Canada, for example, those with less than grade 6 were defined as illiterate and those with less than grade 9 as functionally illiterate. Numerous authors remind us of the inadequacies of using school attainment, or its grade-level equivalent, to measure literacy among adults.⁶ Kirsch and Guthrie, for example, comment: "While these measures are shown to have some utility for young persons, they may not describe the skills that a marginally competent or literate adult needs in today's society" (1978, p. 487).

Typically, operationalized definitions and measurements of literacy have reflected a limited conceptualization of what literacy "is":

Each formulation of an answer to the question "What is literacy?" leads to a different evaluation of the scope of the problem (i.e., the extent of illiteracy) and to different objectives for programs aimed at the formation of a literate citizenry. Definitions of literacy shape our perceptions of individuals who fall on either side of the standard (what a "literate" or "nonliterate" is like) and thus in a deep way affect both the substance and style of educational programs. (Scribner, 1984, p. 6)

Moreover, they tend to localize the problem to individuals. Again, citing Scribner's paper:

⁶Functional literacy tests and competence tests have also been used in the general adult literacy research. See Weinstein-Shr (1995), Kirsch and Guthrie (1978), Rutherford (1989) and Fisher (1987) for more detailed reviews of these other measures.

Most efforts at definitional determinism are based on a conception of literacy as an attribute of *individuals*; they aim to describe the constituents of literacy in terms of individuals' abilities. But the single most compelling fact about literacy is that it is a *social* achievement. (1984, p. 7).

The notion of literacy as a *relative* concept that should be measured as such began to take concrete shape mid-century. Cervero (1985) notes UNESCO's 1956 definition of "functional literacy". One is functionally literate "when he has acquired the knowledge and skills in reading and writing which enable him to engage effectively in all those activities in which literacy is normally assumed in his culture or group" (Gray, 1956, p. 24 as cited in Cervero, 1985, p. 2). Numerous other authors trace the notion of functional literacy to the discovery that soldiers could not complete all the print demands of their jobs adequately (de Castell & Luke, 1988; Kirsch & Guthrie, 1978; Thomas, 1989). In any case, the notion that individual literacy levels can only be understood in a context relative to social and economic organization came to be agreed upon by scholars from a range of perspectives. And, of course, the literacy related to social and economic organization reflect dominant or mainstream cultural practices of literacy that one should know in order to participate in societal relations (Cervero, 1985; Darville, 1989; Gee, 1990; Horsman, 1990).

Traditional, individualistic measurements came to be seen not just as inadequate, but as highly deficient. As S. Jones (1995) explains in Chapter 1 of the *International Adult Literacy Survey*:

Serious deficiencies beset such an approach. It is based on the notion that literacy can be expressed as a dichotomy: either you have it or you do not. But because literacy involves a complex and multidimensional set of traits, dispositions and competencies, thinking in terms of a single literacy cutoff - you are literate when you can read simple prose or if you have received at least four years of schooling, and illiterate when you cannot and have not - is neither appropriate nor conducive to formulating sound policy strategies. (Statistics Canada, 1995, p. 24)

How we conceptualize, define and measure literacy is important for the substance and style of literacy programs and the development of sound policy strategies.

Operational definitions must embrace the social context of literacy as it measures individual abilities to mediate the culturally valued, textual demands of society. Both the Survey of *Literacy Skills Used in Daily Activities* (LSUDA) and the *International Adult Literacy Survey* (IALS) place literacy squarely within the realm of these dominant relations.

The IALS defines literacy in terms of a mode of behaviour, namely, “using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential”. It is then measured along a five-level continuum of increasingly complex knowledge and skill required to complete specific tasks in three different domains - prose, document and quantitative literacies. Similarly, LSUDA defines literacy as “the information processing skills necessary to use the printed materials commonly encountered at work, at home and in the community”. In both definitions, individuals must *do something with print for* some purpose. The purpose is embedded within dominant, socially constructed and socially valued practices of literacy.

Research in seniors and literacy has either been unimaginative or very practical in the boundaries it sets for what constitutes old age and literacy. Concepts of age may take into account socio-cultural factors, but chronological age is often the only criterion used to determine who will and who will not participate in a study. By inference, literacy and seniors’ education tend to be seen as vehicles for coping or functioning by some educational gerontologists -- this has been lamented by others who advocate reading as a means for personal expression or grace. In either framework, or even for those who suggest mixed motivations for, and benefits of, reading and literacy acquisition, school level has typically been the yardstick by which a senior is classified as (under)educated or (il)literate.

This literature review proceeds with the understanding that direct comparisons of studies are often difficult because concepts of age and literacy and the thresholds for each vary. For this reason, “older adult”, “senior”, and “elderly” are used interchangeably.

This variance, however, should not detract from the overall picture of one who experiences the last band of life with limited competence in literacy and changing resources and supports to bridge literacy needs. The next section frames the scope of the issue through three perspectives: statistical, historical and contemporary.

ii. Literacy Levels Among Older Adults

Statistical Perspectives

Older adults have fewer years of schooling than younger adults. About 40 % of adults aged 65 and over have less than a grade 9 education. For adults aged 26 to 35, about 4% have less than grade 9. Conversely, about 22% of Canadians 46 to 55 have attended university while only 13% of those 56 to 65 have done so. The more elderly one is, the less likely one is to have completed grade school, high school or university.

Educational attainment has historically been the criterion for determining which seniors are, and which are not, literate. Fisher (1987) laments applying to older adults criteria designed for the younger adult population. The prevalence of this point of view in the research precipitated Rutherford's claim that "the controversy surrounding the definition of literacy, and the means used to assess it, may be considered one of the significant issues in our study of illiterate older people in Canada" (1989, p. 1). It has had this significance precisely because no adequate measure for literacy levels among older adults had been found.

Education level is strongly correlated with literacy. Canadian data from the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) reveal that about 89% of Canadians with less than grade 8 are at IALS Level 1 on the prose scale, where Level 1 is the lowest of five levels. The figures are 92% and 91% for the document and quantitative scales respectively. The number of persons with this level of education operating at the highest

literacy levels measured are so small that reliable estimates are not possible.

Nonetheless, the figure cannot be more than a few percent as the other 99% or 98% of persons with less than grade 8 education are operating at Levels 1 and 2. Conversely, the percentage of adults with a university degree at Level 1 is statistically too unreliable to release because of sample size; yet 56%, 46% and 60% of persons with university are at Level 4/5 on the prose, document and quantitative scales. However, there are those with higher levels of education who have lower levels of literacy and vice versa (Statistics Canada, 1996). Statistics released in 1995 show this clearly. About 3.3% of university educated adults (16 to 69) are at Level 1 and nearly half of the total (48.1%) are at Level 4/5 on the prose scale. The authors conclude that while "literacy is closely tied to education, it is not the same as education" (Statistics Canada, 1995, p. 73).

If literacy is not the same as education for adults today, it was surely at least as different for those who attended school half a century ago. At that time, the curriculum and learning environments were quite different. Instruction centred on decoding and proper rendition in oral form (Heath, 1986; Resnick & Resnick, 1977). Having reliable statistical data on the literacy levels of various age groups and the connections between schooling and literacy greatly enhances our understanding of the relationship between age and literacy level. Table 1 (p. 22) shows the breakdown of age and reading level in Canada on the three scales used by the IALS.

One can see that seniors fare disproportionately poorly in all three dimensions of literacy used in the IALS. This disproportionality generally holds true for all countries in the IALS survey.⁷ It correlates strongly, though not precisely, with educational levels. Some researchers (Courtney et al., 1982; Fisher, 1987, 1989) would likely argue that these results are problematic because of an inherent "age bias" (Pearce, 1991). Test items designed for the general adult population may disadvantage older adults or other

⁷OECD Countries participating in the IALS include: Canada, Germany, Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland (French and German), and the United States.

Table 1**Distribution of literacy by age across the three scales, Canadian adults aged 16 and over**

Prose scale				
Level				
Age group	1	2	3	4/5
16 to 25	11	26	44	20
26 to 35	12	29	33	26
36 to 45	13	19	37	31
46 to 55	21	30	31	18
56 to 65	38	26	28	8
65 and over	53	27	19	...
Document scale				
Level				
Age group	1	2	3	4/5
16 to 25	10	22	37	31
26 to 35	14	26	34	28
36 to 45	14	22	37	28
46 to 55	23	31	24	22
56 to 65	43	24	24	...
65 and over	58	22	18	...
Quantitative scale				
Level				
Age group	1	2	3	4/5
16 to 25	10	29	45	17
26 to 35	12	23	35	28
36 to 45	12	22	36	30
46 to 55	23	32	25	19
56 to 65	40	22	31	7
65 and over	53	27	16	...

... Sample size too small to produce reliable estimates.

Source: *Reading the Future: A Portrait of Literacy in Canada*. Statistics Canada September, 1996.

marginalized groups. If one were to view older adults as a subculture, in the way that Rose (1965) does, and by inference, in the ways that Coupland and his colleagues do (1993, 1991), then, as a subculture, seniors may have functions for literacy that are largely unique to their group (and perhaps subgroups within it). These national and international surveys, however, are designed to assess individuals' underlying competencies with literacy skills embedded in practices that are related to the kinds of print dominant society is presently demanding.

Presumably, the cognitive processes underlying the use of texts seniors need to know in order to function independently in their particular social contexts parallel the processing demands of tasks in the survey; however, some seniors may be unfamiliar with some of materials used because they have lived in contexts divorced from contemporary texts, if not from printed material in general. This lack of familiarity may undermine or frustrate an older person's performance. Seniors who feel intimidated by, or are otherwise less likely to mediate well the particular materials used on these large-scale surveys, might still manage adequately in daily life. In all likelihood, however, they are managing with literate help from persons within their social networks (Askov & Forlizzi, 1989; Freer, 1994; Lothian, 1992a, 1993, 1996).

When literacy levels by age are standardized for education, literacy levels for all adults tend to increase (Statistics Canada, 1991a). This suggests that a seniors-only test might find a slightly brighter picture. However one looks at the situation, it is clear that if older adults are among the groups having significant difficulty with everyday kinds of print, then something is awry. Some would argue it is the test, which evaluates access to and ability with contemporary printed materials only for the general adult population;⁸ others would argue that it is the home, community and socio-economic contexts seniors

⁸The general population, those aged 15 to 65 or 69, would skew test items towards those print tasks most likely to be mediated by those in the workforce or with children at home. They are the yardstick against which all sub-groups are measured.

have lived through -- contexts very different and divorced from contemporary ones. It is likely both. We have looked at the former and turn now to the latter.

Historical Perspectives

For the first half of this century, Canada's economy was largely based on primary industries. In this socio-economic context, a high level of education was neither widely needed nor valued (Chalmers, 1967; Ross, 1961). Men had to earn a living, and women were expected to support these efforts. For men, school only delayed the monetary rewards of working (Statistics Canada, 1995). As Graff (1986) draws to our attention, higher literacy levels in nineteenth century Canada did not contribute to better working conditions or better pay for manual labourers. For women it was at least as *unimportant* and probably more so given their roles within the private and domestic spheres of life (Chalmers, 1967).

The marginal socio-economic value that was placed on school is reflected in some individuals' recollections of the place school held in their lives. In the Senior's Literacy Program, for example (Lothian, 1992a, 1993), learners missed a lot of school because they were needed at home, because their families could not afford the school supplies, and/or because the long walk was too formidable in poor winter weather and dust storms. They speak of teachers who were either unaware of their circumstances or helpless to do anything about it. Large, multi-grade classes were housed in the same room and this was more than what the most dedicated teacher could handle well.⁹ A few students were given an ultimatum - they could go to school regularly, or not come at all. Under these conditions, most students, sooner or later, simply left school to work for pay or work at home.

⁹Chalmers (1967) and D. Jones (1987) both note that teachers in the country had poor qualifications and worse pay. Turn-over rates were also very high.

In the rural parts of the Canadian Prairies, schools began to open at the turn of the century. It takes time to establish an accessible educational system in remote, isolated areas, where communication can be difficult between farm homes, let alone farming communities, which could easily be miles away. The school year necessarily adapted to these conditions. Children arose early, did chores and then went to school. The school year itself was often two to three weeks shorter in rural areas than it was in urban areas (Chalmers, 1967; D. Jones, 1987). Families that were poor to begin with were expected to pay taxes for something that often had little value to them (Chalmers, 1967; D. Jones, 1987). Some Prairie schools closed in the winter (D. Jones, 1987; Lothian, 1992a); in others, trustees may have hoped for a reduction in the number of pupils so they could close the school house and save money (Chalmers, 1967). It is not surprising, given these conditions, that many of today's seniors got the message that school was not important for them. Many students were forced to choose between "social and physical survival and proper school behaviour" (Fingeret & Danin, 1991; Lothian, 1993).

When these children and young teens left home to support themselves, they sought and found the only kinds of work open to persons with their education and skills -- primary, construction and manufacturing industries. Working on farms or in other primary industries rarely required the use of high levels of literacy skills. IALS notes that even today, "agriculture and other primary workers, for every task, reported the least frequent use of work-related reading materials" (1995, p. 83). In Canada, LSUDA found that "only half of the workers in agriculture and the other primary industries (forestry, mining, fishing and trapping) have skills to meet everyday literacy demands" (1991, p. 41). If reading is not well mastered by, or in much demand for, today's farmers and trappers, it was certainly less so for yesterday's. Ross states it this way:

The period prior to the 1950s also represented a less diversified and complex economy that placed an emphasis on agriculture and manual labour that demanded few reading skills. It was easier in previous times to find a job and make a living without being able to read. (1991, p. 67)

Speaking to a contemporary but parallel context, S. Jones states it this way:

Researchers who have explored literacy in other industrialized jurisdictions with low literacy levels have argued that literacy skill is demand driven. That is, if the need for literacy is low, then there is little motive to improve literacy skill. Further, pursuing higher education, which delays entering the work force, is not an economically wise decision: there is no payoff. And, investing time and money in additional training does not necessarily lead to a better job or greater productivity. (Statistics Canada, 1995, p. 105)

Moreover, even if today's older adults learned how to read and write when young, years of non-use (including lack of opportunity for application) may have caused their skills to decline (Statistics Canada, 1991a, 1995, 1996):

The mere passage of time also erodes literacy skills. Those not required to use their reading skills, particularly at work, will find a natural erosion taking place from the day they leave school. (Ross, 1991, p. 67)

Limited opportunities to learn how to read and write; few opportunities for application because of limited demand in the home and workplace; and concomitant perceptions and realities that it was not needed, converged to construct socio-economic conditions within which today's seniors lived out the majority of their formative years. These same persons who were once expected to "get by" are now expected to mediate a print-based information society that is growing more complex daily.

Contemporary Perspectives

Through no fault of their own, most older adults have disproportionately low literacy levels. This fact alone should be the only justification needed to provide appropriate and accessible literacy learning opportunities for this age group.

Yet, some researchers seem to question the need for addressing literacy among seniors. Courtenay et al. (1982), for example, state that "the mere fact that an individual

has survived for 60, 70 or 80 years implies at least some degree of past functional competence" (p. 344). It has also been pointed out that "lack of basic skills has not deterred many older adults from living their lives as productive and successful adults" (Kasworm, 1982, p. 10). Rather than using these statements as points from which to contend with the low value attached to seniors' literacy (Fisher, 1987; Weinstein-Shr; 1995), it seems more apt, and more accurate, to consider them positively:

If today's undereducated seniors have raised families and held down jobs, worked with better educated people, and contributed to the cultural, political and social life of their communities, towns and cities, they have long ago proved their personal competence. This does not invalidate their need or desire for literacy improvement. (Spore, 1980, p. 9)

In fact, it reflects favourably on their ability to cope, learn and adapt.

Others have argued that the problem will eradicate itself as today's seniors die and better educated, younger persons age (Gonda, 1980). Canadian statistics indicate that tomorrow's generation of seniors fare only somewhat better than today's (See Table 1). Of adults aged 46 to 55, nearly one-quarter have skills at Level 1 on the document and quantitative scales, and 21% are at this level on the prose scale. The figures for adults aged 56 to 65 hover around 40%. If we turn to Level 2, we find that approximately 30% of adults aged 46 to 55, and 24% of adults 56 to 65 are at this level.

Persons at Level 2 may risk skill loss and perhaps become future generations of Level 1 seniors if appropriate opportunities for practice are not forthcoming (S. Jones, 1993). With over eight million seniors expected by 2031 and a national school leaver rate hovering around 20%, literacy for seniors is an issue that is not going to go away soon or easily (Statistics Canada, 1993). Waiting hopefully today for better educated generations tomorrow does nothing to minimize literacy difficulties experienced by over one and a half million Canadian seniors.

Adult literacy and basic education programs could be a valuable resource for helping seniors to help themselves. However, "only self-selected, highly motivated older

students presently participate [in organized language and literacy classes]" (Spore & Pierce, 1980). About 2% of all literacy students in Canada are seniors (One Voice, 1991). Some school boards in Ontario have seniors' programs hosted by seniors' residences and nursing homes. These community outreach programs may have a literacy education component, but they are not necessarily serving (or designed to serve) under-educated seniors and/or those functioning at low literacy and numeracy levels (Lothian, 1996; Marianne Paul, personal communication). Paul, in her survey of literacy programs in southern Ontario found that only 2% of participants were seniors, and only about 3% of learners in Ontario's community programs are over the age of 65 (Community Literacy of Ontario, 1995).¹⁰ What Heisel argues from the American context seems equally apt for the Canadian one:

Our educational system seems to be creating opportunities for the already educated. Those who need it most and for whom it should be most accessible - the undereducated, minimally literate, economically deprived aged - are not being reached. (Heisel, 1980, p. 2)

Spore's (1980) pilot projects in New York seem to be the earliest concerted effort targeted to the less literate elderly. The reports provide rich and thoughtful descriptions of factors influencing first and second language elders' ability and willingness to engage in English language and literacy learning (Spore, 1980; Spore & Pierce, 1980). Jacobs and Ventura-Merkel, six years later, initiated project LEEP (Language Education for the Elderly Project).¹¹ This two-year pilot project involved over 500 tutors and 600 students in 25 sites across the United States. In Canada, One Voice and the National Literacy Secretariat piloted the three-year Senior's Literacy Program from which the field research

¹⁰ A search of the National Adult Literacy Database indicates that 178 literacy programs across Canada have "senior" or "older adult" in their descriptors. This tells us little about the numbers actually enrolled.

¹¹ Project LEEP was a national American effort to: link local seniors' networks and adult education ones; recruit and train older adults as volunteer tutors for less literate elderly; deliver literacy education to older adults in sites where they congregate; and, provide tutors and trainers with materials on how to address the special learning needs of older adults (Jacobs, 1987).

for this thesis originated. And, there is presently a francophone effort being undertaken with a similar structure (one-on-one peer tutoring) in the Ottawa, Ontario, area.

Despite the good will of these efforts, it would seem that governments are unprepared to offer either the long-term seniors literacy classes that basic education requires, or "drop-in" centres where seniors can get help on an as-needed basis. Consequently, many language and literacy classes spring from local initiatives. If they are documented, it is often in a local context, and seldom within a framework for understanding how the particular effort might contribute to the larger picture (Lothian, 1996; Schuylkill Intermediate Unit #29, 1993; Seniors Education Centre, 1992; Von Hahn & Riddell, 1979).

To fully and appropriately address the "problem of illiteracy" among seniors, we need to know what literacy needs seniors have in their daily lives. We need to know what factors affect their perceptions of need, and their willingness and ability to participate in literacy learning opportunities. These are among the subjects of the next section.

iii. Factors Affecting Literacy Learning

Factors influencing seniors' participation in literacy (and other) educational programs need to be considered from the vantage point of program design and setting as well as the experiences, knowledge and ways of interacting that seniors may bring with them. These latter factors - Cognitive, Physical and Sociocultural Considerations - are reviewed after the first.

Program Design and Setting

Older adults prefer informal settings over formal (i.e. classrooms in institutions) ones (Jacobs, 1987; Kasworm & Courtenay, 1982; McGivney, 1990; Von Hahn & Riddell, 1979). They prefer shorter classes (two hours maximum) offered in the day time, once or twice weekly at a location they already frequent or can get to easily (Hiemstra, 1972; Jacobs, 1987; Kasworm & Courtenay, 1982; McGivney, 1990). These considerations help overcome transportation difficulties and reluctance to go out at night (McGivney, 1990).

The American pilot studies suggest that seniors prefer learning among their peers (Jacobs, 1990; Spore, 1980, Spore & Pierce, 1980). The Senior's Literacy Program also suggests that most learners feel more comfortable with tutors in the same age range.¹² There was, nonetheless, some indication with a few students that while age was important in the beginning of the lessons, it became less so after they gained confidence in their ability to learn. It seems that, in the long run, personality and application of adult learning principles were more important to these senior students than age alone.

None of the pilot studies looked explicitly at programs that were age-integrated. Seniors have been largely excluded from many mainstream practices and few attend existing literacy programs. This fact, coupled with apprehensions of formal institutions may account for the suggested preference they have for engaging in learning activities with their peers. Some argue that age-integrated programs benefit the learning of all participants and by appropriately integrating different ages programs can help lessen the social isolation that is experienced by too many seniors who are "put into boxed

¹²One student, unsatisfied with his tutor, cited their age difference as the primary reason. A generational difference between the 75+ English language tutor and the 50+ French as a first language learner was apparent to the evaluation team as well. In this situation, however, the tutor was teaching in a decontextualized manner and focussing on pronunciation. The senior student did not respond well to this approach (Lothian, 1993). While age may have been a reason or an excuse, teaching method and personality differences were certainly at play.

homes”¹³ (Von Hahn & Riddell, 1979; Weinstein-Shr, 1995). Nevertheless, that only a small number of seniors attend age-integrated adult basic education programs suggests that something is still amiss (Jacobs 1987; Kasworm, 1982; Spore, 1980; Von Hahn & Riddell, 1979).

Discussions that touch upon age-integration or age-segregation reach into other factors that must be considered when planning learning opportunities for seniors. The next section summarizes cognitive, physical and socio-cultural factors associated with older adults and literacy learning.

Cognitive, Physical and Sociocultural Considerations

With age, retrieval and reaction times may slow down. The process of learning may take longer. Conversely, abilities that depend on knowledge based on experience and amassed over a life time (verbal comprehension, social awareness, application of experience) often show gains with age (Hiemstra, 1972; Spencer, 1980)). Where studies have indicated that older adults perform less well than their younger counterparts, the differences between the age groups have subsequently been attributed to higher educational levels among younger adults, the effects of depression and medication among older adults, or testing conditions that do not take into account sensory-motor differences between the young and old. When seniors are trained in the (often school-based) task and provided the time they need to perform using their own learning strategies, differences between young and old are negligible or non-existent (Gonda, 1980; E. Jones, 1979; McMahon, 1979; Pearce, 1991; Smith, 1993; Weinstein-Shr, 1995). The very old may have difficulties absorbing multi-sensory stimuli. Incoming images may linger. Some older seniors may find organizing new information problematic.

¹³This is the way one older woman with whom I once worked described her living arrangement in a seniors' apartment complex

Others may experience a declining ability to hear or see. Gradual age-related changes such as reduced manual dexterity (e.g. arthritis) may pose problems, as might sudden age-related health problems such as strokes. What was once known may be partially lost and may need to be re-learned. Nonetheless, no study reports any changes specific to age that would prevent adults from meaningful participation in education (Gonda, 1980; Heisel, 1980; McMahon, 1979; Smith, 1993). Indeed, "age by itself is often the least important factor in cognitive functioning in later life, relative to socio-cultural, historical and health-related factors" (Gonda, 1980, p. 288). Changes arising through the aging process can normally be overcome through appropriate teaching techniques and aids.¹⁴ Sociocultural and historical factors seem to pose more pervasive difficulties.

Older adults often speak of negative school memories (Fingeret & Danin, 1991; Jacobs, 1989; Lothian, 1993; McGivney, 1990; Von Hahn & Riddell, 1979). The social-psychological factors that deterred formal education when these older adults were younger adults have left them a legacy that influences their perception of education today. Spore refers to this as a "threshold problem" (1980, p. 8), suggesting that many seniors fear re-entering a classroom and repeating defeats of their childhood.

She also suggests the fear may be one of traditional learning in formal institutions (i.e. schools and colleges). Be that the case, then it is a fear related to misperceptions of contemporary adult education, where student-centred, self-directed learning in an informal atmosphere is encouraged. For other groups of elders, however, it may be less the case that a fear of formal learning exists than it is that familiar and informal, self- and community-driven learning already takes place (Heisel, 1980; Spore & Pierce, 1980).

¹⁴ According to Von Hahn & Riddell (1979), appropriate teaching aids and techniques include: having good lighting and using high contrast, large print materials on non-glossy paper; speaking slowly and distinctly while facing students; eliminating background noises; enabling students to work at their own pace; expecting quality work; using step by step instructions related to what learners already know; planning lessons around one basic idea, summarizing often; reassuring students that they can learn, and using advance organizers. See also Haase, Robinson & Beach (1979). It is interesting to note that these teaching strategies or techniques are not unlike what one might use with any-aged adult with visual or hearing difficulties. And, many of them are equally applicable to students without any disability at all.

Part of the threshold problem is reflected in societal and personal beliefs that seniors are “too old to learn” (Jacobs, 1990; Lothian, 1992a; McGivney, 1990; Spore & Pierce, 1980). Jacobs (1987) found “hidden elderly” who would not participate in an educational program, or if they did, they had very high concerns about confidentiality. With the older literacy learner, there may be a number of layers of regret and shame and insecurity towards organized education. These attitudes may have been built over a lifetime and may be reinforced in the attitudes towards, and responses of, family, friends and professionals (Kasworm, 1982; McGivney, 1990; Rutherford, 1989; Weinstein-Shr, 1995).

Active and appropriate outreach is essential with older adults. Most will not volunteer for programs (Spore & Pierce, 1980). In the Senior’s Literacy Program, those who came forward were those who were visited up to three times by the coordinator or those with a trusted person at their side through whom the coordinator had negotiated a meeting. Only one learner (Fran) came forward due to a personal crisis in her life causing her to seek help. Like other students, that process was mediated by a trusted person. Local cable programs and church bulletins also got the word out to people who knew people who might need help. Targeted outreach is especially critical for sub-groups among the aged who are particularly vulnerable. A few of these groups (the institutionalized, the immigrant and the rural elderly) are discussed below. Within each special-needs group, it is likely that many will not only be older rather than younger, but also poor rather than rich, widowed rather than married, and female rather than male.

Institutionalized Elderly

About 4% of Canadian males and 8% of Canadian females aged 65 or over live in special-care homes. Although only a small percentage of the total senior population, this group is more likely to be suffering from more numerous and more severe physical disabilities than those elderly who live independently. This is partly because persons

residing in nursing homes tend to be older seniors. Of all senior men 85+, one in four was institutionalized in 1991. For women, the proportion in this age group is more than one in three (36%) women. Of all seniors aged 85+, 8 out of 10 had disabilities (Norland, 1991).

The transition from independent living to institutional living is often unexpected. Many individuals who must make this transition strive to maintain some form of continuity in their lives despite this drastic change (Fisher, 1990); however, the isolation from larger society, coupled with age-related health and sensory difficulties can make continuities difficult. The experience can be “depersonalizing” and contact with friends and family outside the nursing home may become limited. Institutionalization has a tremendous impact on self-concept for the chronically ill, aged patient (McMahon, 1979) and some may respond by “withdrawal from the cognitive field” (Fisher, 1990).

The context in which a senior must live influences the nature and degree of learning interests and needs (Fisher, 1990; Lothian, 1996). Reading (Lovelace, 1979), or being read to (Lothian, 1992a) can enhance the lives of those whose physical and emotional selves are largely cut off from broader interpersonal and social experiences. The administration of an institution has a key role to play in the provision of meaningful educational activities, aside from, or in addition to, recreational ones (Fisher, 1990; Lothian, 1996).

Rural Elderly

Many of today's older adults once worked in primary industries and once lived in rural areas. There is a positive correlation between rural living and lower levels of both schooling and literacy. Whereas 65% of all Canadian adults have limited high school, only about half of those living in rural areas have that level (Statistics Canada, 1991a). *Literacy Skills Used in Daily Activities* (LSUDA) indicates that approximately 17% of all rural Canadian adults have literacy skills at LSUDA Levels 1 and 2. Another 27% are

at Level 3. For urban centres with populations ranging from 100,000 to 499,999, just 9% are at the lowest levels and 71% are at Level 4. Although only about 20% of the adult population presently resides in rural areas, half a century and more ago, rural living was commonplace.

Most seniors (65+), however, retire to small and medium sized urban settings where community services are still available. Only about 7.5% of adults (65+) live on rural farms. Another 10.9% live in non-farming, rural areas (Norland, 1991). The actual number of rural elderly may be quite small, but they face particular difficulties. Rural seniors are the least inclined to participate in educational programs (McGivney, 1990). Long distances and night time travel are cited as deterrents to community participation more often by the rural elderly than by the urban elderly (who cite health and little time). Access to social services or community agencies, if they exist within the vicinity, is difficult without public transit or a car. Indeed, with so few people remaining in, or migrating to rural areas, community resources that were once available (doctors on housecall, general stores, post offices) are slowly disappearing. This trend increases the burden on seniors to be self-sufficient although they may not have the health or mobility needed to be so. In these circumstances, rural seniors may not get the food and medical help they need when they need it. If the situation is discovered at all, it may be too late and institutionalization is likely the only viable alternative.

Immigrant Elderly

All three pilots projects that were concerned with seniors and literacy (Jacobs, 1987; Lothian & Jones, 1991; Lothian, 1992a, 1993; Spore, 1980; Spore & Pierce, 1980) included ethnic minorities, recent immigrants or acculturated second language elders. Statistics Canada data indicate that 2% of our population speak neither English nor French as a mother tongue. In general, the data from Statistics Canada suggest that most

immigrants have lower literacy levels than Canadian born persons, especially if they immigrated as adults.

Even in ethnic communities, where it is often assumed that one can function entirely in the first language, it is apparently not uncommon for seniors to be living alone and needing to interact with the English-speaking culture on a regular basis: "When a spouse dies, children move away, and the neighborhood changes, even shopping becomes difficult for the older non-English speaker" (Spore & Pierce, 1980, p. 8). This is particularly so when second generations become assimilated into the English-speaking culture, perhaps losing their first language. Intergenerational communication may be threatened, leaving the older adult alienated from family ties (Weinstein-Shr, 1995). Partly for this reason, family or intergenerational literacy advocates are beginning to emphasize the inclusion of grandparents and aging parents in family literacy programs (Weinstein-Shr, 1995).

Old, Alone and Poor

The term "jeopardy" is often used when describing disadvantaged groups. As we look at sub-groups of undereducated older adults, a case can be made for a multiplicity of jeopardies - old, less literate, institutionalized, rural or urban, ethnic or immigrant. All of these may translate into a life that is segregated from the "meaning-making mechanisms" that affirm one's personal value as a human being.

Two other jeopardies could be added - poor and female. Nearly half of Canadian women aged 65+ have an income of less than \$10,000 annually. From 68% to 74% (depending on the age group) of women in this age cohort rely primarily, if not solely, on government pensions. A recent Statistics Canada report found that "over 40% of women over age 75 and living alone, are below the poverty line. This translates into nearly 128,000 women (Lipovenko, 1996). About one-third of men aged 65 to 69 and 20% of those 80 and over receive an additional private retirement pension (Norland, 1991).

Most women are poorer than most men, and there are more of the former than the latter (74 men to every 100 women 65+).¹⁵ Women can expect to live about four years longer than men and they can expect to live these years alone. About 34% of women aged 65 to 74 are widowed, as are nearly 80% in the 85+ age group. Whereas men are apt to re-marry after the death of a spouse, women, as a percentage, are much less likely to do this. As a partial consequence of living more years and living them alone, women more than men, are apt to become institutionalized and live with disabilities.

Limited literacy among seniors is an issue for both men and women. However, their available supports and courses of action may differ. Gender as a variable in the analysis of how limited literacy is experienced in old age needs further consideration. In the Seniors' Pilot Program there were about as many men as women. However, the majority of men were younger and were working, looking for work, or disabled. Most men had a living partner. The women tended to be older and living alone. Few learners had incomes beyond government or disability pensions. At least one female student could not afford the reduced-rate seniors' monthly bus pass.¹⁶

Gender as a variable in outreach needs greater consideration as well. Men may be more difficult to reach because they are more likely than women to have negative attitudes towards education and school (McGivney, 1990; Spencer, 1980). Most seniors who attend educational programs are women. This may in part be a reflection of their greater numbers, but it also likely reflects a more positive attitude towards learning and the social contacts learning enables (McGivney, 1990). Among younger men, it has been suggested that literacy learning threatens a man's masculinity (McCaffery, 1987). Might the same be said of older men? Women, more than men, are more apt to cite transportation problems or a reluctance to go out at night as deterrents to program participation. Again, persistence in recruitment is essential (Jacobs, 1987; Lothian &

¹⁵The ratio between women and men increases with age. By the time seniors are 85, there are 4.4 men for every 10 women. It should also be noted that projections suggest that this trend has essentially ended

¹⁶Chapter 2, section 1, profiles the learners in the Senior's Literacy Program.

Jones, 1991; Lothian, 1992a, 1993). Rural or urban, immigrant or not, more women are likely to be poor and disadvantaged by limited literacy than men. But less literate seniors, male and female alike, if they are not reached, will live out their remaining years with limited literacy skills. If they are among the “lucky”¹⁷, they might have the remains of an inner support network to help them or have already forged extended networks for such help. But, then again, as we see in the next section, some older adults would like to be independent of that help.

Older adults can and do learn when provided appropriate and accessible opportunities to do so. To reach and teach this group of potential literacy learners, we need to provide more sustained opportunities and resources so they can acquire the kinds of literacy they need in relation to their literacy levels, interests, aspirations and community contexts. These relations are addressed below.

iv. The Functions of Literacy Among Seniors

American research in the 1970s focused primarily on the reading habits and interests of older adults (de Santi, 1979; Harvey & Dutton, 1979; Kingston, 1979, 1981; Robinson et al., 1979; Romani, 1973; Sharon, 1973), with sometimes contradictory results. Romani (1973), for example, found that retired persons read more after retirement than before, while Sharon (1973) found that young adults read more than older adults and that the very old read the least. Kingston (1981) discovered that seniors expected to read more after retirement than they actually did, and McMahon (1979) suggests that those from the working classes who never developed alternative interests like reading when younger did not begin to do so after retirement. Could it be that these persons could not develop and expand their interests when the time became available because they hadn't the basic skills to do so?

¹⁷ Fran used this term when reflecting on her years of literate dependence on her husband.

In Canada, data from the *General Social Survey* (Statistics Canada, 1991b) find a trend towards higher participation in reading with advancement in age. About 24% of adults aged 25 to 34 read during their spare time (total spare time is only about 4.5 hours a day if employed) while 34% of those between 45 and 54 do so. The highest increment is, not surprisingly, between the pre-retirement and retirement age groups, where the number who report that they are reading increases by ten percent, from 39% for 55 to 64 to 49% for those 65+. Seniors who read tend to do so for an average of 1 hour a day. That is about 20 minutes more than adults 55 to 64 and thirty minutes more than those between 35 and 44.¹⁸ The time older adults spend on reading, while more than younger adults, is significantly less than the amount of time they spend watching television.

About 85% of seniors watch television, and, they spend more time doing it than any other adult age group. Of the 7.7 hours of free time available to the average older adult, 3.3 hours are passed watching television. Adults aged 15 to 24 spend, on average, just over 2 hours a day. Canadian data from the *International Adult Literacy Survey* (Statistics Canada, 1995, 1996) show that persons with lower literacy levels tend to spend more time watching television than persons with higher literacy levels. Moreover, more persons at lower levels report getting more information from television than they do from newspapers. The reverse is also true. More persons with higher literacy levels are more likely to report the newspaper as their main source of information.

In their remaining free time, nearly 3.5 hours, seniors are likely to engage in fitness activities (walking), and recreational and socializing activities connected to church and community participation. These latter interests and involvements are reflected in their reading interests. This is the topic to which the discussion now turns.

¹⁸Retired Canadians have an average of 8 hours of free time per day if they are not working. They have, on average 7.7 hours if they are employed. Employed Canadians under 65 years old have just 4.5 hours per day of free time on average and those under 25 have about 5.4 hours of spare time. About half (51%) of retired Canadians read books, magazines and newspapers. This compares to 29% of employed Canadians (Statistics Canada, 1991b).

Reading Interests and Functions

Seniors who read, report that they read books, magazines and newspapers.

Specific topics of interest include: religious texts; health and nutrition; leisure-related reading; the aging process; grieving; wills, estates and general financial management; and wise consumerism (Harvey & Dutton, 1979; Hiemstra, 1976, 1972; Kasworm, 1982; Kingston, 1981). Fictional interests include: biography, westerns and light romances and mysteries (Harvey & Dutton, 1970; Kingston, 1981). The functions of reading noted in the literature include:¹⁹

- gaining information and knowledge
- enjoying leisure time and entertainment
- personal renewal and self-actualization
- improving consumer wisdom
- developing of skills for living or coping with the aging process
- addressing intergenerational conflict and cultural transmission
- attending growing concerns with health and nutrition
- awakening memories and reminiscences
- enhancing life in a nursing home context
- seeking companionship and enlightenment
- work-related (for those still working or interested in work)

Attempts have been made to organize, categorize and make general theoretical sense of these functions. To date, such efforts have been framed by “expressive” and “instrumental” polarities (Havighurst, 1976; Hiemstra, 1976, 1972). Expressive functions refer to activity or participation that is engaged in for its own sake. Instrumental refers to life-skills requirements and informational needs for functioning in today’s society. Freer (1994) uses the terms “expressive” and “coping”.²⁰ McCluskey (1971)²¹ argued for five senior-specific educational needs: coping, expressive,

¹⁹This list is largely adapted from Weinstein-Shr’s recent review (1995). Fisher (1987), Pearce (1991) and Smith (1993) have also done shorter reviews. Rutherford (1989) did a summative review with a focus on Canada. Their accounts are consistent with one another and my own readings.

²⁰As noted at the onset of this chapter, such categories are informed by psychological or educational frameworks rather than sociological or literacy-related ones.

²¹His categories are summarized in *Aging and NACA: The NACA Position on Lifelong Learning*. The National Advisory Council on Aging (1990).

contributive, influence, and transcendence needs. Coping or instrumental, and expressive needs have been noted. Contributive needs speak to older adults' need to give something of themselves to society. Influence suggests the need to promote social change, while transcendence needs refer to the desire to develop a deeper comprehension of the meaning of life. Despite the early date of this study few others explicitly draw upon its entire framework for understanding the functions of reading among the elderly. On the one hand, it is quite plausible that instrumental and expressive needs succinctly cover the connotations of the other three. Conversely, it may be assumed that adults with limited reading abilities may be less interested in reading for purposes that correspond to the top level ends of this hierarchy (c.f. Heisel, 1980; Rigg & Kazemek, 1983).

Most early studies characterize older adults as having primarily instrumental learning needs and interests (see Freer, 1994; Pearce, 1991; Smith, 1993). They use informants from all walks of life and base their generalizations on data derived from psychologically-motivated closed-category scales and inventories. Studies that use open ended interviews paint a more diffuse picture (Askov & Forlizzi, 1989; Freer, 1994; Heisel, 1985; Heisel & Larson, 1980; Jacobs, 1987, 1990; Lothian, 1992a, 1993; 1996, Spore & Pierce, 1980). These informants are undereducated, have limited literacy skills and may or may not be attending a literacy or adult basic education (ABE) program. These students want to read: newspapers (for entertainment and information); books (any book); magazines (news magazines, religious magazines, those related to leisure time interests, and senior-specific ones); the Bible and other reading related to church activities. Interest is also expressed in reading stories and writing letters to grandchildren. Written correspondence is frequently mentioned by non-native English speakers and those geographically distant from relatives (Askov & Forlizzi, 1989; Freer, 1994; Jacobs, 1990; Lothian, 1996; Spore & Pierce, 1980). Unless one knows the literacy level of individuals involved and the specific reasons why they want to read or write a specific kind of text, it is hard to know whether mediation of that text is seen as

an instrumental or self-expressive endeavour, or some mixture of both. Spore believes that "communicative competence" underlies the goals and interests of older adult literacy and language learners (Spore & Pierce, 1980).

Freer's (1994) study of 10 rural informants (six of whom were receiving tutorial help with literacy) identifies the following instrumental reading needs or interests: personal mail, understanding social security and other essential documents, keeping track of personal finances, and reading for shopping and health products. Lothian (1992a, 1993) found similar needs and interests being met. She also found that some seniors were interested in writing letters to the editor in local newspapers. One wanted to read maps (see also Heisel, 1980).

Askov and Forlizzi (1989) asked senior ABE students what they must read to get by in their everyday lives.²² In order of frequency, the following everyday reading demands were noted: prescriptions; ingredients on packaging; directions on packaging; advertisements; bills such as the phone bill or electric bill; phone book; bus; subway or street signs; forms; car insurance; Medicare; and coupons. Most students could read most of these (functional or instrumental) materials.²³ When the authors asked these students what they want to read that they cannot read now, a slightly different picture emerges. Those who could already read what they must read, wanted to read magazines (news magazines, religious magazines and senior-specific ones), stories, the Bible and stories to grandchildren - materials akin to expressing interests noted in other studies. Those who cannot read what they must in order to get by (or who do not want help with reading these materials) were more likely to cite functional needs such as writing cheques, reading bus and train station signs, and reading labels on packaging. Thus, reading goals and interests seem to reflect self-perceived literacy level in relation to the

²²In this needs assessment, 5 participants had less than four years of schooling, 3 had between 5 and 8 years, 2 completed between 9 and 11 years and 1 completed high school in her country of origin. Subjects were between 60 and 80 years of age.

²³Most of these materials are documents that are not senior-specific, but that assume the general expectations of societal organizational relations.

help they can get through their social networks and the extent to which they are content relying on this help.

Without interpreting these findings within an adult literacy conceptual framework, Askov and Forlizzi (1989) have characterized literacy as a socio-cultural phenomenon and indirectly affirmed that these older adults want to improve either their prose literacy or their document literacy.

Askov and Forlizzi (1989) concluded of their group of seniors that they "seem to have a variety of educational interests but few real needs" (p. 15). Lothian (1996) drew a similar conclusion when she conducted a needs assessment of a group of elderly Dutch Canadians. In Chapter 5, where the personal stories of Mary and Fran are discussed in relation to their perceived literacy skills and the *quality* of their social networks of literate help, a distinction between interest and need becomes useful.

In Askov and Forlizzi's (1989) needs assessment, students retrospectively indicated that they joined the ABE class to: improve reading; be with a friend (the tutor); learn more; read independently; join Bible class; go to school; regain skills after an operation; and, because they were inspired by others and the classes were convenient and available. When Kasworm (1982) asked open-ended, probing questions regarding why older ABE students joined a program, what influenced their decisions and how they had used (and intended to use) their learning, seniors responded with "reasons of personal value [that] include: its immediate socializing aspects...its outlet as an expressive form...and its value in relation to inwardly directed reasons" (1982, p. 203). When she asked about the impact of the program on their lives, these seniors noted such things as renewed interest in life, friendships, increases in self confidence and self worth, greater independence related to everyday activities and a stronger sense of control and stability. Her study suggests that while the content of instruction may be life-skills oriented, the motives for attending and the reasons for staying are similar to one another and dissimilar to the life-skills preference she had inferred - at least with those who could meet their

everyday survival needs. Freer (1994) concludes in his study of independently living rural elderly that:

All informants, regardless of age, gender, or tutorial participation status, were motivated to improve their reading skills in response to both their coping and expressive needs. This was true for those living alone and those who were living with their spouse or family. (Freer, 1994, p. 162)

This finding seems to contrast in interesting ways with what we learned while evaluating the Senior's Literacy Program. Like Forlizzi and Askov's (1989) study, seniors in the pilot evaluation program were more apt to cite functional or instrumental learning needs when they perceived themselves to have low skills and when they had either no help or unwanted help. Students who had acceptable help with functional literacy needs, or could already meet those needs (regardless of their level of skill or self-perceived abilities) tended to be motivated by predominantly expressive interests. It would have been interesting to know what the quality of the social networks were for seniors in Freer's (1994) study and whether any correlations similar to those just noted actually existed.

Spore and Pierce (1980) argue that communicative competence in both oral and written English motivates older native and non-native speakers of English to participate in English literacy programs. The authors argue convincingly that expressive needs situate and propel specific instrumental goals (c.f. Kasworm, 1982):

Clearly, the ability to negotiate services is important to elders, but it is the expressive power of the written and spoken word which motivates older (as well as younger) persons to seek out ABE and ESL. (Spore & Pierce, 1980, p. 5)

Yet the evaluation results of the Senior's Literacy Program suggest that while expressive power may motivate some with higher levels or satisfactory help, it does not necessarily motivate all. At the same time, a discovery of expressive power may be among the benefits and may keep people involved.

Jacobs (1990) identified the specific needs, interests and motivations of older adults when she states that, in general, senior learners seek enhanced self esteem, life enrichment, independence and completion of unrealized goals.

None of these studies untangle how literacy learning in particular can be a route to these ends. None of them look specifically at the role or nature of independence, in relation to the quality of social networks and (perceived) literacy abilities. Only a few make observations about the circumstances in which less literate seniors must manage. Without a socio-cultural and life span perspective, the functions of literacy for the less literate senior will always remain elusive. We turn now to studies that place literacy usage in a socio-cultural context.

Socio-cultural Contexts of Literacy Use

Heisel and Larson (1980) found that poor, elderly, urban blacks, with low literacy levels were uninterested in formal literacy instruction. Instead, these informants were self-directed learners who continually engaged in informal learning activities within their community. Despite their difficulties with printed English, that would lead one to "predict that most of the black elderly included in this study would be unable to cope with the literacy demands of their daily lives" (Heisel & Larson, 1980, p. 69), these informants were satisfied that their reading skills were meeting their needs and even indicated a lot of interest in reading, or reading better, such materials as already noted magazines, the Bible and books.

Like Askov and Forlizzi (1989), Heisel (1985) and Lothian (1996), suggest that these seniors have many learning interests, but because of the socio-cultural context in which they live, they do not see a *need* to pursue more formal educational programs that focus on basic literacy skills. Lothian (1996) directly relates her conclusions to how seniors' perceptions of need and interest are influenced by the socio political culture of

the residence within which they live. She found that as long as there was the prospect of literate support within the community, what was seen as a literacy need by an educator remained in the realm of "interest" to the potential student. Other kinds of learning, those that engaged critical thinking but did not require reading and writing by every individual, were preferred. Only at the encroaching loss of support, or a strong personal desire to be free of it, would an interest come to be articulated as need. At this transition point, help is needed. Mary's and Fran's stories should add to our understanding of these issues.

Fisher (1990) also finds community context an important factor in his comparison of "readers" and "nonreaders" in an impoverished nursing home. He found that self-defined nonreaders could and would read what they needed to function in the context of that home, but read little or nothing else, and, "the purpose for which reading occurred among these alleged nonreaders was conditioned by perceived need and physical ability" (1990, p. 113). It seems that this setting did not produce many or varied literacy demands upon residents. A perception of need was generally not apparent. Indeed, in this "intellectually impoverished" setting, where "social rewards and organizational reinforcement for literacy or cognitive effort were absent" persons had "withdrawn from the cognitive field" (1990, p. 114).

Community context and the literacy demands it places on individuals seem fundamental to the perception of need individuals have and the potential to act on those needs. This is no less true for seniors than it is for younger adults (Statistics Canada, 1991a, 1995, 1996). However, seniors, who are often isolated emotionally, socially or physically from mainstream activities may have markedly different community contexts than younger adults. Their social networks of literate help (Fingeret, 1983a) may be quite different. Of the nursing home residents, Fisher (1990) states:

In contrast to the findings of Fingeret (1983), there was no evidence that literacy played a role in any social exchange or was related to any social networking.

Subjects read on their own initiative as part of self-directed learning or self-initiated leisure time activities. (1990, p. 114)

Similarly, Freer (1994) notes:

The individuals in the present study showed no evidence of having developed "mutual exchange relations" (Fingeret, 1983) to compensate for later life difficulties with reading, although there was evidence of a "reader" in the older adult community who helped those who could not read. These readers used their reading and writing skills to help their neighbors and friends at the bank and doctor's offices and in reading the mail. There was no evidence of reciprocity as described by Fingeret (1983). (Freer 1994, pp. 165-165)

The relations may not be reciprocated, but they constitute part of a changed social network that requires these elders to seek help from extended networks, further afield. It is unclear, however, whether these persons depend on "readers" because they had no one left in their social network or because they wanted to be independent of the remaining structures they do have. Freer (1994) continues:

All of the informants in the present survey reported that they needed help reading their mail. They used to ask their family or co-workers for help. Now they ask their tutors or someone at the senior centre or just "lay it aside"...[t]he present survey provides ample reason to doubt that the methods of compensating for lack of literacy skills used in the past are adequate in late adulthood...The older adult becomes increasingly dependent on social service providers. "If I have something to read, I take it to the Senior Center." (p. 165)

Again, we do not know if the families of these older adults were available or if they could have been relied upon. Askov and Forlizzi (1989) note that seniors stayed in the class primarily for socialization and (seemingly) secondarily because they were learning (see also Kasworm, 1982). They also conclude:

The majority of the participants indicated indirectly through their answers that they would like to become more self-sufficient. Even though they have support networks to rely on, they are interested in becoming independent of these structures to some extent. (Askov & Forlizzi, 1989, p. 15).

Seniors in this study seem to want some measure of freedom from literate dependencies. They also seem to not want to jeopardize the security offered by their other networks. They stay in the class as much for socializing as for educational reasons, if not more so. This observation, that places socialization as integral to effective learning, is common. Weinstein-Shr (1995) notes:

One group of Navajo elders has reportedly attended English literacy class for nearly 15 years despite little tangible evidence of progress! Some other need is obviously being met as elders gather together with persistence to pursue English language and literacy instruction. (p. 12)

McGivney (1990) conducted a study in England to identify typologies of non-participants in general adult educational activities. She found that single mothers and older adults mentioned the greatest number of practical deterrents to participation. She also noted that seniors may become dependent on programs in which they participate: a condition not always discouraged by their tutors:

Practitioners have found that older participants tend to become dependent on a particular course or group and some return to the same activities year after year. At one of the adult education institutes, many daytime classes have a majority of older participants:

Some of whom have been coming for 20 years or more. They get "hooked". [tutor]

Some educators believe that this tendency is not sufficiently discouraged by teaching staff...Tutors of the elderly often have an over-protective, pastoral emphasis that arises from narrow, stereotyped views of old age, and this discourages independence, choice and risk-taking. They argue that tutors need to be trained to help older adults to become more self-reliant, independent and resourceful. (1990, p. 104)

Independence and dependence are among the themes this thesis explores. These issues may be as integral to the literacy instruction of older adults as they are to their social networks. These issues have, at best, been given only cursory glances by a very few researchers. Studies that even pay this glance to social networks in general, or Fingeret's (1983a) article in particular, do so to comment on the deterioration of past

networks or the (non)existence of present ones. All assume, as does Fingeret, that past networks were helpful to individuals, and the tragedy of the less literate older adult results not from a life lived with limited literacy skills (for they could 'get by'), but from an older life that is robbed of those network resources.

v. Summary

This chapter has reviewed relevant data that bears directly on seniors and literacy. Although the most prominent themes in the literature are gaps, contradictions and lamentations, this review suggests that there is some foundation of information from which researchers can draw. There is a lack of depth in discussions about what constitutes old age and literacy. A major portion of the work contends with literacy definitions and measurements designed for the general adult population, and applied to older adults. The remaining bulk of research examines the socio-historical reasons for limited education and literacy among seniors and the factors (environmental, physical, cognitive and socio-cultural) that can affect learning. Related to this are elders' reading habits, interests and functions. A good portion of this research is spent trying to decide whether seniors are instrumentally or expressively motivated, or both. One might think this the only framework available for analysis.

Incorporating national and international data into the general findings and looking specifically at studies that use literacy students or potential literacy students as informants, tiny inroads into the social worlds of less literate seniors are beginning to be etched out. It seems that many of the same variables that are relevant for younger adults also hold true for older adults. Objective literacy level may be less important than self perceived reading ability in relation to contextual demands. Seniors in one nursing home and one residence and two ethnic communities tended not to perceive learning to read better as a need. Their social contexts did not demand literacy skills of them that

extended beyond what they could already do either independently, with help, or as a collective. Seniors whose self-perceived and/or objective literacy levels were insufficient for everyday functional needs cited these needs as their learning goals. However, if those same persons had acceptable support from their spouse, the community or other trusted persons, they were more apt to articulate goals of self expression. They were at least more apt to articulate goals that encompassed both expressive and coping needs. Where the help they received was undesired (for reasons generally unknown) they tended to want to manage their own functional needs first.

Much more work is needed to assess and test the validity of these conjectures. I believe they are worth exploring for they bear directly upon seniors' aspirations and for literacy learning in relation to the circumstances in which they must manage and the personal and social resources available to them. It does not seem coincidental that the IALS definition of literacy placed "to function in society", "to achieve one's goals" and "to develop one's knowledge and potential" in that order.

As the dichotomous conception of literacy and illiteracy falls away, it is hoped that the polarized conception of expressive and instrumental does also. Obscured by those preoccupations are other gems of potential insight. These other gems, are, to my mind, the ones worth mining. Independence is superficially noted in only three studies. Empowerment is mentioned as an area for further speculation in one, and democracy arises only in the form of motherhood statements. There are tacit assumptions that literacy is about grace. Literacy as function was a central theme, but again, more knowledge of its social contexts and relations is needed. Perhaps most critically, there is little in the way of how successes with literacy learning might continually and interactively relate to supports and resources, both personal and societal.

In part, this study attempts to incorporate into this area of research constructs from adult literacy and discourse theory. As Mary and Fran are both women, a gendered perspective is essential. As their lives unfold in Chapter 3, their inner perceptions of

experience take us on a journey of contexts, conditions and feelings associated with not learning to read and write well, not having opportunities to rectify the situation, and then being left alone and forced to adapt to a changed social network of literate support. By seeing their experiences as less literate adults and seniors we understand better the disservice that dependence on others for literate help has engendered - not just towards the end of life, but throughout it.

Chapter 2

Context, Development and Framework

At the ribbon-cutting ceremony commemorating the official opening of the Senior's Literacy Program, Senator Joyce Fairburn was quoted as saying:

There are many things happening today...But to me, on Literacy Day, 1990, the place to be is Medicine Hat because you are doing something unique. Nothing like this is happening anywhere across the country. What is going to happen in Medicine Hat is going to set a standard for seniors across the country. (Medicine Hat News, September 10, 1990)

The Senior's Literacy Program was a big deal. It was the first nationally funded literacy project in Canada designed specifically for older adults (aged 55+). Through partnerships between seniors and literacy communities, the program aimed to:

- pair literate seniors with their less literate peers (age 55+) for free, one-on-one, individualized instruction
- systematically develop a senior-specific tutor training model
- increase awareness of the need for literacy among seniors,
- systematically evaluate the program in each of these areas for the program itself as well as for others interested in providing literacy services for seniors.

Arising out of a partnership forged between One Voice²⁴ and Medicine Hat College at the 1990 *Learning - That's Life* Conference, the Senior's Literacy Program was timely, contributing to the formulation of a National Literacy Strategy for Older Adults (One Voice, 1991). The principle goal of the Strategy was to:

...achieve a state where low literacy level does not stand in the way of Canadians' full participation in and enjoyment of their own lives and society....A major objective of this strategy would be to improve literacy skills among older Canadians. (One Voice, 1991, p. 8)

²⁴One Voice is a national organization promoting the interests of Canadian seniors.

The Senior's Literacy Program in Medicine Hat was to be a testing ground for this objective. Evaluating the effectiveness of its senior-specific model was paramount for its potential to "serve as a standard for seniors across the country".

The Centre for the Study of Adult Literacy²⁵ undertook the evaluative component of the project. Stan Jones, Director of The Centre, supervised the research. Already approved when I was hired as the research assistant, was the evaluation's largely formative framework and "eolithic" methodological approach (S. Jones, 1990).²⁶ Literacy, social networks and independence in the lives of Mary and Fran emerged as a thesis topic precisely because the pilot evaluation project supplied a useful context for fieldwork and defined parameters for inquiry.

This chapter summarizes the evaluation design and methods. It then shifts to the conversational interviews with Mary and Fran. In that section I reflect on the process of continually dipping in and out of the women's stories in relation to my evolving understandings of the patterns within them, ongoing conversations with my academic advisor, and the literature on literacy and older adults.

i. The Pilot Evaluation

The evaluation framework was largely formative; that is, "it was aimed at providing information to help the program improve" (Patton, 1982, p. 48). To this end, we needed to see the program in progress. We needed to see what it was doing, how it was doing it, and how the interconnections between these processes related to program outcomes. If our observations and analyses were going to help the program improve,

²⁵The Centre for the Study of Adult Literacy offers in-service training for adult literacy practitioners, develops, publishes and distributes tests and assessment materials for adult literacy; and, consults with organizations, institutions and employers on adult literacy needs and training.

²⁶*Eolithism* is another word for practical. In assessing the situation at hand, the investigator obtains whatever information is needed in whatever ways are practical given present resources and circumstances. See Patton (1982).

they needed to be accurate and to reveal the program in as naturalistic and holistic a way as possible. Rich and detailed descriptive data were called for (though not necessarily exclusively called for). Qualitative evaluation methods are ideal for the kind of picture we hoped to make. With qualitative methods, "the evaluator discovers the meaning and impact of the program through the perspectives of the participants; analysis is inductive rather than deductive, and is concerned with process as well as outcomes" (Fingeret & Danin, 1991, p. 5).

Three areas were to be assessed and evaluated (S. Jones, 1990): 1) Direct service to learners; 2) Tutor training and recruitment; and, 3) Awareness of the issue. The purpose and methods used for each of these follow.²⁷

1. Direct service to learners:

For the evaluation team to help the program identify effective instructional practices with elderly learners, we were partly interested in what students would learn, but primarily in how they learned what they did. Informal, systematic, tape-recorded interviews conducted with learners centred on these general topics:

- how they got involved in the program, and why
- their first day in the program
- a typical session with their tutor
- what they are doing and how they feel about what they are doing and learning

The broad, open-ended nature of these sub-topics allowed for learners to express their experiences in the program in their own words. Samples of students' work at various points in their learning progress were also collected and reviewed.

Conversational interviews with tutors uncovered their views on "how it's going". We asked tutors what they were teaching, how they were teaching it, and why. Ongoing conversations with coordinators often centred around the learning and support needs of

²⁷Over the course of the three years, members of the evaluation team visited the program at least twice each year.

student/tutor pairs. Lastly, general demographic information about learners and tutors was obtained through interviews and questionnaires, or initial assessment documents and tutor profiles supplied by the program, as appropriate.

2. Tutor training and recruitment:

To help the program systematically develop effective senior-specific tutor training, the team assessed and evaluated the training both as an introduction to general adult literacy work as well as senior specific work.

Two tutor training sessions were attended with the researcher acting as participant observer. Detailed notes were taken throughout each session and overheads, handouts and other materials were collected and reviewed. Informal, tape-recorded interviews with new tutors were conducted shortly after the training session and again six months later (after the tutor had worked with a student). Information solicited from coordinators and tutor-trainers touched upon their impressions of the training, how they might do it differently in the future, and how training volunteer seniors to be tutors compared with training younger adults for the same task.

3. Awareness of the issue

Two kinds of information were sought when assessing and evaluating awareness: (1) General awareness of the issue of seniors and literacy; and, (2) specific awareness of the seniors' literacy program. We documented program advertisements; newspaper, newsletter and journal articles; as well as presentations made about The Senior's Literacy Program. We also conversed with coordinators, tutors, learners and a few persons affiliated with the senior's and literacy communities.

Evaluation Process

Qualitative methods enabled us to infer relationships between program content, process and outcome. The formative framework enabled us to share these ongoing observations and analyses with key persons in The Senior's Program.²⁸ The information helped the Seniors' Program plan and incorporate change. It also informed subsequent lines of inquiry for the evaluation team. For example, interviews with tutors following the first tutor training revealed that tutors wanted instruction that was more practical than it was theoretical. They would have liked more "how tos" and fewer "whys". The Seniors Program subsequently planned and delivered a more "hands-on" tutor training session. At the same time, the evaluation team noted that those who had not taught before were more apt to feel insecure about tutoring than those who had. This observation noted, we planned to monitor in subsequent visits how these potential tutors would actually experience their roles as tutors. In doing so, we found that these insecurities were largely unfounded in practice. Many tutors who had never taught were very effective. They seemed to bring fewer preconceived notions about teaching and learning and generally listened to their students carefully and responded to their needs as best they could.

Each visit to The Senior's Program informed the direction of inquiry for subsequent visits, and the team planned accordingly. Flexibility built into the evaluation design enabled us to adapt our own plans in response to the circumstances of a particular visit.²⁹ For example, six months after the first tutor training session, we planned a follow up review with tutors to assess how well they thought that the tutor training actually prepared them for what they were doing. We arrived in Medicine Hat having planned to

²⁸Observations and analyses arising from each visit were continually discussed and refined among members of the evaluation team and key persons in the program. Drafts of the evaluation reports were critiqued prior to publication (Lothian & Jones, 1991; Lothian, 1992a, 1992b, 1993).

²⁹Patton (1982) calls this "situational responsiveness".

talk to as many tutors as possible. To our surprise, two students (Mary and Fran) had indicated a willingness to share their experiences of learning in the program with us. After about six months of instruction, they were interviewed and their self-defined successes were the first indicators of the program's effectiveness for some students and tutors.

We repeated the same process for the second tutor training as we had for the first (participant observation, note taking, conversational interviews). Approximately half of the tutors in the second tutor training were experienced tutors. The evaluation team then explored possible influences and uses of experienced tutors in training sessions. Another visit enabled us to speak with tutors who had undergone an individualized training. Their perceptions prior to, and initial experiences of, tutoring were compared to the perceptions of those who participated in the group training.

Program Participants

At least 66 older adults were involved in the program during the three year duration of the pilot evaluation.³⁰ Of the total number involved, 19 were men and 47 were women, and there were 31 learners and 35 tutors. We spoke directly with 10 learners (3 male, 7 female)³¹ and eighteen tutors (4 male and 14 female)³² and gathered comprehensive information about the literacy needs of another 5 students through their tutors. As much information as possible about the remaining students (16) was acquired

³⁰ Only tutors and learners who actively participated in the program are included in this calculation. Some older adults were interviewed by the coordinator, but did not join. The tutor training acted as a screening process for some tutors. A few trained tutors were never matched with students, and some tutors trained by the coordinator acted as supply tutors. If all persons who touched the program, however briefly, were counted, there would be nearly 80 older adults.

³¹ Only ten learners were willing to speak with us.

³² Interviews with tutors reflected the circumstances upon arrival. Many tutors who participated in the tutor training were interviewed afterwards. The program held monthly "Tutor Coffee Party Meetings" and a group discussion with tutors was the focus of this meeting in the second to last visit. Ten tutors were interviewed one-on-one. Six of these tutors were among the original group and each was interviewed at least twice. Mary's tutor was interviewed four times, and Fran's three

through conversations with, and records kept by, the coordinators.³³ At any given time, 10 to 13 pairs were actively working, with a peak, one autumn, of 17 active pairs. Temporary inactivity for tutors and learners was largely the result of ill health and family responsibilities. For a few tutors and one learner, travelling also caused a break from instruction. Two men in their 50s left the program when they found a job, though one later returned upon the cessation of this work. Another 6 students entered the program, met some goals and chose to leave. Four of those students later returned with new goals, while the other two were on leave at the end of the evaluation research. There appear to be two students who left the program without having met their goals. Lack of support, health problems, limited lifelong opportunities for personal growth, and extremely limited communication skills are reported to have made a sustained learning commitment difficult for these persons.

Other reasons cited for learners and tutors completely leaving the program include: health, other volunteer commitments, relocation and death. Students who were actively engaged in learning are profiled in the following section. A briefer summary of active tutors is also included.

Student Profile

Of the 31 students involved (17 females, 14 males), ages ranged from 50 to 94. The four oldest were women (90-94) who farmed in German-speaking communities for their entire lives, never attended school (for none existed in their very young years) and were presently living in a nursing home. For these women, *learning* to read and write was physically inappropriate because their eyesight was too poor to make out even larger print, or their hands were too arthritic to hold a pencil for a sustained amount of time. They wanted to conserve their energy for other (often religious) purposes. Learning to

³³As the program developed and expanded and the coordinator received much needed additional help, record-keeping continually improved and initial student assessments gradually became more thorough.

read seemed perceptually inappropriate to them because others helped with the seemingly few literacy needs they had.

These women believed they were too old to learn how to read and write. They did not necessarily believe they were too old to learn. Although uninterested in spending time being tutored, they were interested in participating in the printed world and increasing their social contacts. In response to the special needs of these self-defined old and institutionalized elderly, the seniors program developed a small "Read To, Read With" program. These four women joined the program as active listeners.³⁴ Tutors volunteered their time to read "real-life" prose and poetry. One tutor read the Bible and another sometimes read mail. Having noted the special needs of this learner sub-group, the learners' profile continues with a focus on those who joined the Tutoring Program

Age, Gender and Marital Status

Of the 26 students in the Tutoring Program, 14 were men and 12 were women. Ages ranged from 50 to 88, with a median of 60 and an average age of 63.2. Men, with an average age of 59, tended to be younger than women, where the average was 68. Men ranged in age from 50 to 82,³⁵ the women, from 53 to 88. Ten students were married and all but two of these persons were younger men. Thirteen learners were widowed. All but two of these were women. Two were divorced and the marital status of the other two is unknown, although they lived alone.

Language, School and Work Experience

At least thirteen students spoke English as their second language. They were born into Canadian communities dominated by one linguistic group (8 learners) or they

³⁴Other women in the nursing homes participated in this activity, but no record of them exists except through the tutor who welcomed more listeners. This program clearly met a need for socialization, cognitive stimulation, and personal enjoyment.

³⁵The 82 year old man died shortly after he began instruction in the program. No other man as old as he entered the program. The average age without this man factored in is nearly 52.

immigrated as children (1), young adults (2)³⁶ or older adults (2). One of the newer Canadians held a university degree and a prestigious occupation in her homeland. The other apparently had no schooling at all. All but the most recent immigrants became self-taught English speakers or learned English at school. Nearly all students, regardless of linguistic background, were sensitive to "proper" English.

Of the 19 students who shared their educational background with the evaluation team, the coordinators or their tutors, 8 did not go beyond grade 8 (or age 15), 2 did not go beyond grade 6, and 7 had no schooling at all.³⁷ Two students were university educated. One of these was the new Canadian previously mentioned, and the other was an engineer who reported a loss in spelling skills after a motorcycle accident.³⁸

Of those students for whom we have more detailed information, almost all report having had "no opportunity" to get an education. They worked, were ill, or looked after someone who was.³⁹

A handful of students clearly spoke negatively of school (physical punishment and cross teaching). The label "mental handicap" has remained etched in the psyche of one man. For most students, however, school was just a place they went when they were not needed at home. Some recall teachers who were kind and sensitive, but powerless to help them learn more or better. Most of those who went to school tried hard to keep up with their school work, but irregular attendance rendered this an impossible task. Two report being "passed through the system" (as far as grade 6 and 8) because teachers felt sorry for them. Two others report being given an ultimatum - either come to school

³⁶One of these women had 8 years of schooling in her homeland, and the other had none.

³⁷It will be recalled from the literature review that number of years in school is a questionable indicator of reading and writing levels among seniors. Adding to this dubious determinant is that many seniors are unsure themselves how many years of school they had. Some marked leaving school by their age, rather than by their grade. One woman was put in grade 1 when she was 8, and a man began school in grade 3 because of his physical size. Because nearly every student missed a lot of school, none felt that what they learned corresponded to the expectations of the grade.

³⁸It was later determined that this man's needs were at a level beyond what the program should be offering. During his short involvement, he was also taking correspondence courses and achieving very high marks.

³⁹Most students farmed as children and often as adults. Other work included the railway, domestic help, mills and factories, waitressing and homemaking.

regularly or leave school completely. Sooner than later, they left school, as children or perhaps young teens. After 40, 50, or 60 years had transpired, they were trying to acquire those skills that they had not had the opportunity to acquire earlier in life.

Tutor Profile

The 35 tutors (5 males, 30 females) ranged in age from 50 to 85, with most aged between 66 and 70. All but four had finished high school, with many having also attended college, university, Normal School and upgrading or interest courses. Three had tutored in general adult literacy programs and at least two others reported having been trainers in their workplace. One had once taught Sunday School. Most tutors had worked in professional or semi-professional fields (teachers, clergy, military, nursing) or services such as small business owners, bank tellers and store clerks. The remaining tutors worked as homemakers. All tutors either spoke English as a first language, or had learned it well at a young age.

Nearly all tutors were involved in other volunteer community work. Some spent as many as 20 hours a week in community service. And, while many of these other volunteer commitments were centred on the elderly, not all were. Some volunteered in hospitals and others contributed their time to church activities. Some helped in the senior's community centre and others in the local Legion. A few also participated in the Heritage Alive Program where elders visit school children and talk about various aspects of by-gone days. Reasons tutors chose to volunteer in The Seniors Literacy Program included:

- general desire to do good
- specific desire to help those less fortunate
- seeking new interests
- seeking new friendships
- personal satisfaction through meaningful involvement
- its one-on-one nature

The most effective pairs developed rapport, mutual trust and respect. Tutors were committed (or learned to be committed) to students' goals and preferred ways of learning. Effective instruction was task-oriented and practical. In short, the most successful student learning transpired when the tutor applied the principles of learner-centred adult education. Part of this process for seniors entailed adapting instruction to sensory needs.

Summary

The evaluation design delineated the largely formative and qualitative nature of the evaluation process and methods. The rich, descriptive data arising from interviews and participant observation allowed for the identification of relations between program content, process and outcome. Many of these relations might otherwise have remained hidden. The evolutionary process and qualitative methods also allowed for the kind of exploratory freedom that enabled me to enter into the social worlds of two less literate senior women who had had significant literacy successes in just six months of instruction. The specific contexts of the interviews and their evolution are the topics discussed next.

ii. Emergence of a Thesis

Mary participated in four open-ended interviews, and Fran participated in three. The first conversation with each spanned nearly two hours of tape-recorded talk. Subsequent conversations were shorter, each lasting about one hour. All visits with each woman provided opportunities to view and collect samples of work. A few visits enabled opportunities to work with each on a particular literacy task. Thus, while Mary may have received help reading a story, Fran got help with an arithmetic problem.

During the first conversation with each, I intuitively, even naively, pursued lines of questioning based upon what they were saying, and in some instances, what I felt they were leaving out. The women wanted to share their stories and each demanded of me that I understand her life on her terms. I found myself trying to understand why neither had learned to read and write adequately at *some* point in her life; why she would enter a literacy program *now*; and, how literacy learning was affecting each woman within the everyday contexts she must manage. I listened to their words, felt moved by their stories, wrestled with patterns hidden therein, and continually broached ever-deeper levels of understanding and inquiry. The remainder of this chapter tries to capture this story of process.

Conversations with Mary and Fran

Conversations are negotiations (Shotter, 1993; Tannen, 1994). Speakers continually and interactively align themselves with, and distance themselves from, one another. I was not thinking in these terms when I first met Mary and Fran. Nonetheless, I held onto a quiet but very real sense that differences in age and experience might also create distances in our conversation. Alignment with each woman transpired through the two most natural recourses available - introduction through a trusted person⁴⁰ and chit-chat.

Chit-chat was paramount to the success of the interviews. It was the foundation from which mutual rapport and trust were built. It set the emotional tone that the conversations would take and, I believe, contributed significantly to the depth of personal information that Mary and Fran would be willing to entrust to a stranger. Common ground found in mutual interests, attitudes or humour came to overshadow initial

⁴⁰The coordinator of the Senior's Program took me to Mary's and then Fran's home and stayed until such time as she felt each student was comfortable with me alone. All other conversations involved just the learner and myself.

apprehensions held as much by them as myself. Behind these discursive factors was the fact that we were individuals meeting over a shared context and purpose: Mary and Fran were ready to tell their stories and I was interested in hearing them. This kind of personal involvement is "the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives" (Oakley, 1981, p. 58). As soon as each felt safe enough, she began to talk openly and freely, admitting me into her confidence, sharing with me experiences of her past that she had longed to forget, or circumstances of her present that she longed to control.

For all aspects of the evaluation, we pursued specific kinds of informational goals. Nonetheless, we wanted to enter into the conversational interviews with learners with as few preconceived notions as possible. The conversational process itself would guide how best to acquire the information sought.⁴¹ This was in keeping with the formative framework of the evaluation design.

Nevertheless, I had formed some general expectations of older literacy learners, although they were not then articulated. Monitoring my personal reactions and responses to the women and their words forced to the surface some of these expectations. All of what they shared was interesting, but little of it was surprising. When Mary and Fran each mentioned that they had had little schooling, no surprise was felt; the literature is consistent on this. Similarly, one-room school houses and long walks to and from school are among the mythology of the era. We have probably all heard our parents or grandparents compare how it was 'back then' to how it is now. Mary and Fran were no exception.

At first, academic interest was largely secondary, save for a few facts that would be relevant for the evaluation data. As the conversations continued to unfold, it became increasingly clear that neither Mary nor Fran could separate her past from her present.

⁴¹ Mary was interviewed before Fran, and as a result, expectations existed with Fran's interview that did not with Mary's and the topics worth exploring expanded to subsume some of the issues that the conversation with Mary brought to light.

Neither could talk about her present involvement in the program without connecting it in webs of meaning, to experience that spanned the entirety of her life. Mary and Fran were demanding that I understand the contexts of their limited literacy skills. Their earnestness impressed and moved me, and I wanted to understand these contexts as well. Lines of questioning naturally drifted in directions beyond the needs of the evaluation goals. The conversation largely took on a life of its own, and, unaware to me at that time, would result in information that would develop into the emergence of this thesis. Something more profound than a simple assertion that work took precedence over school began to take shape.

Relatively low levels of self esteem were expected and found.⁴² Similarly, for the positive impacts of literacy learning. Less expected was the *degree* to which learning was positively affecting them. Their animated tones, gestures and expressions of achievement contrasted sharply with the sometimes somber and matter-of-fact digressions that revealed shame, regret and even bitterness about their literacy, family or gendered situation. How each woman expressed and framed her experience - juxtaposing literacy achievements against past obstacles and future aspirations - revealed that literacy held a central place in their perceptions of themselves and their abilities.

Seemingly unimportant details took on greater importance, and important life events became better framed. The first conversation was the first phase in what would become a long and involved process that compelled me to dip into and out of each woman's perspectives, in search of meaning, while also reaching beyond those expressed experiences to the outer, social discourses that framed them.

⁴²This is not necessarily true of all of the students. Two of the men and two of the women we spoke with had other sources of self esteem, through family and work. Although all of these persons were aware of their limited English literacy skills, they all accepted that the circumstances bringing this about were not their doing. All three spoke English as a second language and one had suffered a severe stroke. One reported never having been bothered by literacy level because he could always do what he needed to do. But now he wants to do more. It is possible that these individuals chose not to reveal their literacy deficit

Analytical Processes

Physical and emotional distance from each woman enable me to reflect upon their stories in new ways. Areas of similarity and areas of difference were noted, and one personality seemed as intriguing as the other. Two crucial commonalities, which were evident long before we parted company, seemed particularly noteworthy: Each had lived her life within the confines of traditional female roles; and, their husbands had looked after the printed tasks of the household. Women and literacy was an area with which I was already familiar. Connections here seemed transparent at first. Not until the tapes were transcribed (an analytical process that itself invited previously unseen connections) and the women's words were organized into themes, did a fuller understanding of these complexities become evident. For the purposes of the pilot evaluation, twelve themes were identified: ⁴³

1. Can do (what the women can do with print as part of instruction)
2. Want to do (what the women still want to do - long and short term goals)
3. Successes (what the women can do in their everyday lives that they could not do before; successes may be written, read or spoken)
4. Stigma (negative feelings of self as a result of being non-readers; negative attitudes imposed by others)
5. Dreams (past and present aspirations as these involve literacy; regrets in relation to hopes)
6. Schooling
7. Personal history (chronological events and facts of their lives)
8. Support /coping (how they used, and felt about using, help with literacy)
9. Husband (nature of relationship with him as this involves literacy)
10. Teaching methods (how they learn and like to learn)

⁴³I used Ethnograph, a computer program designed especially for qualitative data for the process of organizing and naming identified themes.

11. Health
12. Video (feelings about participating in a televised program)

While transcribing and analyzing their words raised more questions than answers, writing their stories as descriptive case studies (Lothian, 1992a) clearly demonstrated how little of their lives I really understood, and how much there was to learn. Questions became harder to answer. The tentative answers became easier to question. With this back and forth process, hypotheses were being created, tested and rejected in favour of those newly formed.

Responsibility for getting their stories “right” began to weigh heavily. Ongoing discussions with my thesis advisor affirmed that the stories were worth telling and helped me to think through what they were saying. These conversations brought to my attention Fingeret’s (1983a) article on illiterate adults and social networks - a point to which this narrative will return.⁴⁴

Consequent to this, the original twelve themes were reconceptualized into the following five for the purposes of this thesis. These new themes created the framework of analysis for the patterns in Mary’s and Fran’s lives that are discussed in Chapter 4.⁴⁵

1. Literacy successes (new and meaningful learning and doing as described by each. Program Impact might have sufficed as a label as well)
2. Self identity (changed and changing feelings about self)
3. Support network (changed and changing nature of literate and other help)

⁴⁴I am not certain when I first read Fingeret’s (1983a) article. However, reading it in light of Fran and Mary’s stories, it was as if I had read it for the first time.

⁴⁵As noted, Mary was interviewed four times, and Fran, three. Permission to use their stories for my school work was granted during the second interview. No other themes emerged that could not be encompassed by those already identified. Information was already being repeated in the second interview and this continued; with new information becoming increasingly rare. The opportunity to follow the women’s learning in a longitudinal way took greater precedence than the maxim of qualitative research that suggests one could or should stop eliciting information when it begins to be repetitive (Gilense & Peshkin 1994; Patton, 1982).

4. Traditional gendered roles (perceptions, feelings and behaviours revolving around roles as girls, women, mothers and wives)⁴⁶
5. Literacy learning processes (how each woman learned what she did)⁴⁷

Their stories were to constitute the fieldwork of this thesis. I (re-)read literature from disciplines such as seniors and literacy, women and literacy and educational gerontology. Articles from feminist and cross-cultural perspectives as well as the sociology and psychology of older adults and literacy learners informed the ways I looked at Mary's and Fran's experiences. A multidisciplinary perspective was needed in order to make sense of how and where Mary and Fran might fit.

Two aspects of the search became striking. First, I found no other study that describes in detail the life-span experiences of older women literacy learners, or indeed, of any single adult literacy student. Qualitative studies of literacy students that do exist fulfill other purposes. For example, Norman and Malicky (1986) have done interesting work on the perceptions of reading and writing held by adult literacy learners. Their work speaks to how students' perceptions influence the literacy learning process. Horsman (1990), Lloyd (1991) and Rockhill (1987) worked with women and clearly brought out many of the social contexts in which women literacy learners may have to manage. However, these studies tend not to discuss literacy levels or literacy successes.

Second, many aspects of Mary's and Fran's stories meshed well with much of what the literature had to offer, no one conceptual framework or theoretical model fully captured the understanding with which I was coming to terms.

The analytic process began in conversation with each woman. It became more encompassing when distance enabled prolonged and more thorough reflections. From that reflection, conflicting notions of dependency continually resurfaced, and Fingeret's

⁴⁶All themes (save Video) were evident in the subsequent interviews as well, although some categories were combined. Most of these themes were apparent in the analysis of other students' transcriptions. Support arose in every discussion with every learner. An additional theme that emerged with other students was religion. Also, each of these four themes encompass a life span perspective.

⁴⁷For the purposes of this thesis, literacy learning processes has been largely excluded from analysis; however, in the narration of the women's stories in Chapter 3, the process of learning is described.

(1983a) article seemed particularly relevant. This article argues that illiterate adults should not be seen as incompetent dependents, because within their social networks, literacy is but one of many “reciprocal exchange relations”. Social networks are the connecting links individuals have to each other (Rose, 1965). These links usually extend outward from the individual:

Social networks have two parts: the inner and the extended network. Inner network relationships are characterized by reciprocal exchange relations and often primarily include kin; extended networks include those with whom there is a consistent relationship but with a lesser degree of interdependence. Extended network relationships are rarely invoked for aid and may include employers or representatives of caretaker agencies. (Fingeret, 1983b, p. 159)

Mary's and Fran's stories pose a challenge to the argument that sharing literacy skills can be equated with other kinds of reciprocal exchanges. They challenge the notion that even “interdependency”, where literacy is a commodity in the exchange, can be seen as helpful for individuals. And, they pose this challenge through the unique perspective of older adults who have lived their lives dependent upon literate help from others within their inner social network. Disagreement with the essence of Fingeret's article is the essence of this thesis.

Finally, a language or tool was needed for conveying how I made sense of the complex, context-bound patterns of Mary's and Fran's lives. The theoretical framework had to account for both similarities and differences in the details of each woman's experience. It had to allow for the everyday lives of two people to be central to its analysis. It also needed to be responsive to a life span context. Discourse theory meets these criteria. It frames how I came to understand social-psychological forces on their self-identities that worked to keep these women outside of dominant practices of print. While the analysis of Chapter 4 draws upon it, the language used is not necessarily bound to it. Coming to this understanding of discourse theory was among the final steps in the process of accounting for literacy in these two lives that I have not lived.

Discourse Theory

Discourse is written and spoken language in use. Through discourse, continuities and change within individuals and societies transpire. Discourses are appropriate uses of language in particular contexts for specified purposes. As Gee (1990) notes, when we use language in this way, we are playing out social roles: He states:

A 'role', as I am here using the term, is a combination of saying the right sorts of things in the right way, while engaging in the right sorts of actions and interactions, and appearing to think and feel the right way and have the right sorts of values. I call such integral combinations of sayings-doings-thinkings feelings-valuings, 'Discourses'. (Gee, 1990; p. xv)

Specific social situations oblige people to engage in specific kinds of roles or discourses. And, as Gee observes, we have many roles. As long as we know the rules, we can wear many hats and move from social situation to social situation with ease and comfort, perhaps style. If we don't know the rules we risk getting it "wrong". That is, we would be marked as not belonging to the social group(s) that mediate that context naturally.

To mediate a context naturally, as a rightful member of the social group(s) that do so, is to get the discourse "right". To get it right, we must be socialized into the right discourses for the right kinds of contexts. "What we think, feel and do is always indebted to the social groups to which we have been apprenticed" (Gee, 1990, p. xi).

Apprenticeship or socialization transpires initially and powerfully through our social networks. And social networks, as we have seen, are the connecting links individuals have to one another. Those in our inner circles (family and friends) are usually our first and most impressionable trainers. Our social networks, as affiliated with and embedded within social groups, are influenced by, among other things, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic standing and education. These interconnections, in turn, are situated within particular community contexts and framed by broader societal relations.

As one ages, networks normally expand and community contexts often change. One's social world thereby changes and enlarges. This process is ongoing and interactive. New or expanded experiences provide avenues for acquiring new or enriched discourses. New or different experiences may or may not mesh well with those discourses already learned in home and community. Thus, if one has already begun apprenticeship into the kinds of discourses expected at school, one will be more greatly advantaged in that situation than those whose discourses are substantially different. In the latter case, it may come to be that individuals not meeting the tacit expectations of a dominant institution may come to feel excluded by the workings of that institution. This kind of exclusion is often described in a language of "otherness" or "marginalization".

Discourse routines are specific. We are expected to navigate our dealings with schools, banks and other institutions representative of dominant societal relations and organization using appropriate, rule-governed language and behaviours - roles. Broader societal relations and meanings also come down to us, framing and constraining, and often regulating what are acceptable roles. Of course, the specific and broad routines interact dialectically. Roles become not only specific interactions and actions, but they are also manifestations of social categories:

When we speak of a category we have a whole set of complex terms and assumptions implied by the category that allow us to understand what it means to be "illiterate" or "mother". All of these - language, assumptions, and meanings constitute discourse. (Horsman, 1990, p. 22)

We know, as do most individuals in our society, what being a student, mother, husband, farmer, teacher or whatever, entails. The discourses of dominant social relations are expected and assumed. Regardless of the particular social groups with which we are affiliated, it is assumed that we are literate. It is assumed we can do our own banking and pay our own bills. The organization and construction of broader societal relations works on these premises.

To use discourses inappropriately for a particular context is to get it wrong and be judged by others as getting it wrong, perhaps incompetent or "stupid". It is in our vested interest to get the discourses that are important to us, right. When we get them wrong the message is clear: In school, the message is clear when a child is not recognized for ways of story-telling that differ from traditional, linear narratives (Bloome, 1985; Gee, 1990; Heath, 1986); for a traditional wife and mother the message is clear when she embarks on endeavours, such as education, that are perceived as threats to her dependent role (Horsman, 1990; Rockhill, 1987); for a traditional husband and father, it is clear when he cannot be depended upon to provide the family's sustenance. For those with limited literacy skills, it is clear when they cannot speak or write standard English:

Because "standard" English is the language of schooling, literacy for most children has meant learning a language that is a form of "second language" whose orthodoxies have little to do with the language of home or street" (Batsleer et al. 1985, 14). In this process, the student's own language comes to seem incorrect, which can easily lead to students seeing themselves as inferior. This domination of the means of expression and communication...goes a long way toward explaining how school has been a place of silencing and becoming "stupid" for working-class children from many communities. (Horsman, 1990, n. 13).

Discourses are socially constructed and perpetuated; yet, the responsibility for getting them right (or the blame for getting them wrong) lies not with society, but with individuals or groups who are implicitly expected to know and mediate them. Only the strongest and those with alternative, affirming discourses available to them can avoid the marginalization and perhaps alienation that may ensue. In these ways, discourses help shape who we think and feel we are, in relation to others and in relation to society.

In sum, the discourses we can comfortably navigate are indebted to our social groups through day-to-day conversations within our social networks. Our self identities are dialectically enmeshed within these relations. And, these relations are dialectically enmeshed within communities that are themselves situated, constrained and regulated by broader societal relations. Thus, our self identities, our social networks, our community

contexts and dominant social relations continually interact and (re)construct over the course of time. Individuals at any point in time might accept or reject, wholly or partly, discourse (or identity) labels attributed to them. But, to question or reject them, to participate in a "discourse of resistance" (Horsman, 1990) entails knowledge of alternative discourses as well as a real opportunity to act on that knowledge. Letting go of one set of values and behaviours without having another in hand is an all too risky endeavour for most. Having another in hand entails having had an apprenticeship into another. To receive an apprenticeship one needs a member of a group who is willing and able to show the way. But even here, the tradeoff may not be worth the risks, for the process involves not just the individual, but persons within the individual's social network.

Literacy and the language of the literate are highly valued in our society. Like most discourses, however, these are perceived dichotomously. You are or you are not literate. You can or cannot read. I have already discussed the deficiencies of this pervasive view in the first chapter. Literacy, education and the ideological values behind these reach into the deepest foundations that build and bind our society together. Not being a member of the social group(s) that mediate these discourses, can, and normally does, infringe upon our deepest sense of "who we are".

Understanding the interrelations between literacy, social networks and independence constitutes a central objective of this thesis. Neither Mary nor Fran could talk about literacy without also talking about how they felt about themselves, the help they received, and their traditional social roles. These notions, as well and the social contexts that worked to apprentice them into the discourses of some groups and away from other groups, are evident throughout the changes and continuities of their lives. With these notions in mind, we turn to the life stories of Mary and Fran.

Chapter 3

Mary and Fran

i. Before the Senior's Literacy Program

Childhoods

Mary and Fran were the daughters of German-speaking parents who entered the Canadian Prairies with hopes for some good land and a better life. They must have been disappointed, for the land each family settled upon, hardly the fertile land of dreams, was nearly a desert. The farm on which Mary was born in 1921 was twenty miles from the nearest town. She would live on that (or another) isolated farm among German-speaking communities until well after she married at the age of 21. Mary was the third eldest in a family of eight surviving children. As the first two children in her family were girls, her "strict" father thought that the third child, Mary, should be a boy.

M: *The first two [girls], he didn't say too much, but after I'd come, like, when somebody used to come to the house and stuff and he'd always - and you'd hear this - he'd say, "Well this is supposed to be a boy." Well, it wasn't. It was another damn girl! And he was just holding it all against me.⁴⁸*

⁴⁸Transcribed interviews were as precise and complete as the recording quality allowed. The following abbreviations are used to indicate who is speaking: F: Fran; M: Mary; Q: Interview question. Some excerpts have been edited for readability or brevity. Text in square brackets either clarifies the context or adapts the sentence to read more grammatically. Three dots (...) indicate spoken text that has been removed. In some cases, sentences and phrases were merged as the women wove their way back to the original topic. In other cases an interview question is omitted. Periodically the women requested that the tape-recorder be turned off. Personal information shared during these requests is not included. In a very few cases, I have combined excerpts from two interviews, choosing the better articulation of a particular point.

Mary was not the son her father expected, and she believes he was particularly harsh with her for this reason. But, she sees him as typical of Germans in that era - "the stricter the better". Her memories of her father are poignant and mostly negative. Her mother, whom she loved very much and nurtured through an illness, taught her how to cook, sew and crochet. In Mary's senior's years, she would teach others how to crochet. The closeness she felt for her mother contrasts sharply with the anger her father's memory stirs. Amidst these polarities, Mary's lasting impressions of her family life speak to a co-existence more than a shared love or burden. She "feels that [she] wasn't around".

Fran, who was born ten years later than Mary, was the third child in a family of four. Her mother died when she was just three years old:

F: *Well, I didn't have it normal, because my mom died when I was 3 years old and dad was single for years and then he married. [His new wife] was young too. She was only 18 or 19. Well once [they] had children on their own - in four years we all left. Couldn't help any more. We weren't needed.*

When Fran thinks about her father, it is with a sense of personal struggle. He was a stubborn man, if not a very strict one. She never really came to know her step-mother. But still, she came to feel displaced and unneeded at home. Fran looks back on her early years growing up and poses many "what if" questions:

F: *I often wonder if I could have really gotten the education, what I would do. That often bothered me. I thought no, I don't want to think of what could've been....Because when we were young and my mom passed away....Some people wanted to adopt me and the youngest, but dad wouldn't. He would never adopt [us] out to anyone. [He said.] "No matter how hard it got, those kids wouldn't be apart." And I often thought why didn't dad adopt us? I kinda held it against him. I didn't want to, but I always felt, why didn't he? Maybe I'd have got an education - maybe.*

Though she knows circumstances of home, poverty and (as we shall see) school were as much to blame for her lack of education as any decision she or her father made, Fran has yet to fully resolve the relative weight and composite influences of all of these circumstances.

On a typical childhood day, both Mary and Fran were more apt to be found working in or around their farmhouses than sitting at desks inside one-room school houses. They had little choice:

M: *In those days you didn't get very much school. As soon as it got cold the schools were closed. In the spring they opened up, and folks didn't have the money to buy the clothes and everything for kids to go to school out in the country. Mom was sick a lot and you had to stay home to help and everything.*

F: *In the school there was only one teacher and one dictionary and we missed half of the winter because we were five miles out from the school...and in the summer there was always one of us kids who had to stay home and help with the other kids because there were so many in the family then. I missed an awful lot of school, which I really - I really regret.*

German was the language of their homes. English was the language of school:

M: *When I went to school, I had to learn English at school. That come first. Well, it takes quite a while to learn the language at school. And if we were caught talking German from the mean teacher, we got the stick on our head. We had to stay in at recess.*

Learning English at school would have been difficult enough in these circumstances even if the school had stayed open all winter and Mary could have attended regularly. She learned how to speak it in spite of circumstances working against it:

M: *There is one [teacher] I really remember. His name was George Whip. If you are so scared of a teacher, you don't learn nothing. He was mean to everybody. There were lots of times that they had to call the school trustees. Finally they got rid of him.*

The few English words Fran picked up from her older sisters were hardly enough to make a difference when she started school:

F: *When I started school I spoke German. I talked German. I couldn't speak English.*

Yet, Fran does recall one of her first days where a teacher taught her an English word by drawing a picture of it: "Why I remember that, I don't know," Fran interjected. Perhaps this incident stands out precisely because of its uniqueness. It may have been one of the few times that she got the direct attention she needed from a teacher:

F: *There was only one teacher, and, you know, if you miss so much work, you need more attention...By the time you look something up in a dictionary, they were on to something else. And I was so shy to ask for help. I'd sit in the back row...[The class had students] from grade one to grade ten. [The teachers] didn't know I was missing so much.*

Memories of home and school awakened the same emotions each had felt at this earlier time in her life. Mary and Fran could now let themselves react to those feelings in ways neither could have expressed as a child. Anger surfaced when Mary talked about her strict father and mean teacher. She is firm in her belief that "the old folks in those days thought the boys need school but the girls didn't." Fran's gaze became downcast and her voice gradually fell to a mumble as she re-lived the quiet humility she felt at school and the aloneness she felt at school and home. She came to feel displaced and

unwanted in both centres of her life. She failed grade seven. She left school and home at the age of fourteen.

Mary, who was older, left school at the same age:

M: *I only had about grade four...I don't know if I was thirteen or fourteen, but I had to stay home already.*

She stayed home to nurse her mother back to health and then, at the age of fifteen or sixteen, was sent "20 to 30 miles away" to work on another farm. The government paid her father the \$5.00 monthly wages that she earned.

Mary "had" to leave school. Fran "quit" school. After failing grade seven, she resolved not to go back: "When I got this report card - when I didn't pass - I said no more school!" On her grade 7 report card, Fran had written the subject headings: "Language, Literature, Music, Arithmetic, Social Studies, Nature Science, Health, Spelling, Art". Her teacher filled in the mostly failing grades and wrote, "If Fran does exceptionally well during the 1st of this next year I will consider promoting her. Fran has not been promoted to grade 8. Sorry". This report card, which Fran has kept for half a century, symbolizes to her a life that might have been, and a life that came to be.

She went "to town" to get work:

F: *My sister got a job in a restaurant waiting tables and I couldn't. I was too young. So [the restaurant owner] hired me to watch her kids. I was fourteen. There were four kids. The baby was just small.*

About a year later, she was old enough to work in the restaurant.

F: *It was pretty hard for me to do because we had to get the food bill and add up stuff and it took time for me - and then the other girls helped. They were pretty good with it. But you knew at those times they'd come in for veal cuts and a*

bunch would come in and you'd know it was \$2.65 or something. I worked there maybe 1 year or 2 years, I think. And then I worked in the Pottery.

Fran attributes her arthritis to the working conditions at the Pottery:

F: *It was so cold, we worked in the winter and there was a kiln and they had the lid up and it was just open flames on both sides of the kiln and we'd sit on the chair and [the pottery pieces] would come down [the plane] and we had to sponge it, or sometimes put the handles on and trim them, and as they were coming down this plane, they were quite gassy and it wasn't too healthy either, and we had to add water, and you know, the clay, how the water gets dirty, you'd be running back and getting more water and it didn't take long to get cold. It was cold.*

For both women, moving from their German-speaking communities into English speaking towns ultimately led to the disuse of German in their homes:

F: *All I know was German, like, when I got married, my husband's parents were German. When we got married, we lived in [my in-laws'] basement for I don't know how many years, and they'd say don't lose your German. And they always talked German to me so I'd catch on. So I kinda got on to it. After we moved, it was English mostly.*

For these farmers' daughters, being in a literacy program as older women reminds them of a pained initiation into spoken English and formal learning through experiences set within overcrowded one room schoolhouses. Many of these recollections they would sooner forget, or at least prefer not to discuss: They left school feeling like it was somehow their fault that they were not successful while there. They left feeling like they could not learn at school and they would come to a fear any situation that might make them feel as "dumb" as school did. As we turn to their adult years, we see how the legacy of these early years shaped the lives that were to follow.

Adulthoods

Mary and Fran were adults before their time. One must wonder whether they were ever really children. Hard work, not play, was central to their formative years. It was the work, and the work of care, expected of girls. Mary's mother had a "bad heart" and Mary tended to her. She wrote this story after being in the Senior's Literacy Program for about one year.⁴⁹

Work Sample A: My Loving Mother (Mary)

September, 1991

My Loving Mother

I loved my mother very much. She was a very hard worker and I learned all I could from her. She made sure that I could cook, bake bread, cookies, pies and a lot of other things.

She taught me to crochet and sew. When she could not sew she cut out dresses and other things and I have to do the sewing with the sewing machine. It was the machine that you have to treadle by foot and she could not do it when she was sick because she had a heart condition.

Fran was always a mother. She looked after her step-mother's children and later a restaurant owner's. Mothering her own children would be the next step. As young girls, Mary and Fran learned to fill their expected roles of wives, mothers and homemakers:

⁴⁹ Mary's tutor typed most of Mary's stories on computer. These final versions were the ones Mary wanted to share with me.

“Women got married. That was the choice”, Fran plainly spoke. The love and labours of domesticity would follow:

F: *In those years you knew when you got married that the wife stayed at home, raised the children and cooked, and washed and cleaned.*

Mary and Fran married. In a new way, their lives continued on a path that placed care and love for their family at its centre. Each regrets not finishing school, but during the early years of marriage life was too hectic and too demanding. Going back to school was not a foremost concern for Fran:

F: *Well, after I got married and had my children, then the time for the school went out. I never thought about school. You know, raising a family kept my mind busy all the time.*

Nor was going back to school at this time seriously considered by Mary:

M: *[My husband and I] worked out together, then moved, and worked at the farms there. We couldn't afford [our own place]...I was helping inside and outside the house...When you're doing hay and that, there had to be somebody stacking it and somebody loading it. By the time you were finished with all that hard work, the day was finished.*

When Mary and her husband moved to town, her husband worked as a truck driver and Mary began raising their adopted daughter. She later got a job cleaning in the local hospital, a job she would keep until the hospital closed twenty years later. Fran's and Mary's days were full. Going back to school during these early years of marriage was simply unthinkable.

F: *I know they wanted you to stay home and look after the children and wash and scrub and stuff. If I could do it again, I would - I should have went to school.*

Going to school later remained largely impractical. There was never a reason pressing enough:

M: *My husband did all the banking, paid the bills, and if there was any letters too, he wrote them, and everything. Well, I never got a chance to do it. And not once thinking that such a thing could happen, that he'd be - that we'd be taken away from one another.*

While Mary's husband did all literacy-mediated tasks of the household, Fran's did all the bureaucratic tasks:

F: *[My husband] was always there, you know. If there was his own banking or anything like that to do, I didn't go. I stayed home. I don't know enough of that. I never did go. We got into that routine already, and when there was stuff to do, I didn't [do any of it]. He had already done everything...[He said] "Don't worry about anything."...And so I just depended on him for everything.*

And, he did all the writing that might take place in public:

F: *At funerals and weddings and things, I never wrote my name...When I was with him, he did it. I knew how, but I just - I scribbled...I could write my name all right and I wouldn't because it was unschooled. I just didn't have - It's not that I couldn't do it - to write properly is it? I hadn't done it. I was afraid.*

She was also afraid to enter a bank:

F: *I never did get to grow up really. I never paid the bills, any of that stuff. I was always scared of when I'd go in. I didn't do any banking.*

Busy with the responsibilities of home and family, neither woman had the time to go to school to improve her literacy skills. Fran, however, did sometimes try to help herself.

Where safe and private opportunities presented themselves in the course of her day-to-day life, Fran would “work at it”. She tried to learn from her children’s homework:

F: *I worked at it. My daughter - when they went to school, when they used to do work - I used to sit and try and, you know, give them stuff to do - to try anyway to help me with - to learn my math - because I couldn’t write out 102,000 or 15,000 I didn’t know how to do that.*

Fran always felt her lack of education and always regretted it. It held her back and kept her shy. She was determined that her children would not live their lives under the same shadow of inadequacy:

F: *“Get your education.” That’s all I drilled into their heads. “Go to school and get your education.”*

And yet, neither Fran nor Mary was ever motivated strongly enough to make the considerable time that going back to school would need:

M: *Well the problem was my husband was here and he always said, “Well let me do it. That’s what I’m here for, is to do it.” And so he wrote out the cheques and what we needed and he paid the utilities and everything else like that. He did all that work and not ever, ever thinking the time is going to come when I need to do it myself.*

From the onset of their marriages, Fran and Mary depended upon their husbands to handle all bureaucratic or otherwise public dealings that involved print. Neither woman ever paid a bill, wrote a cheque or talked to a bank teller. Mary never wrote anything - not even a card or letter. Fran corresponded in writing with a friend, but that was a personal and private affair. She would later read to her grandchildren - but that didn’t count either. With their husbands at their sides, Mary and Fran were never

motivated strongly enough to act on any inner desires “to go to school and get an education” (Fran):

M: *Well, I was thinking of it quite a while ago - even when my husband was still here. I said, ‘I would sure like to go to school.’ But, I don't want to go, because I says, if you go out to college or something, they would say, “What in the hell is she doing here - old like her coming to school.” I never went on account of that. I always felt guilty and my husband always said, “Well as long as I'm here I can help you.” But nobody ever thought that he'd leave before I would.*

Fran believes her husband “would have let [her] go back to school when the kids were older. But as long as the kids were small, then he didn't.” Fran never actually told her husband this. She “couldn't” because:

F: *I just didn't think I could learn. And I just, I can't figure it out - I just didn't have the confidence.*

With her children grown and living on their own, Fran's husband died. In the years after his death her children encouraged her to go back to school, but again, Fran “couldn't”.

F: *I would have went to college, and you have to be there everyday. You have to do it everyday, where I can't grasp it as fast as that.*

Neither woman had acted on her desire to go to school as an adult. Both were afraid of the college and the younger adults they expected to find there. Fran couldn't keep pace at school when she was a child and she feared its repetition as an adult. As long as their husbands were there, able, willing and assuring them that they would always be there to look after things, neither really had to go back:

M: *"Well let me do this, and let me do that." He'd say, "What am I here for? I'll do it. I'll do it." And that's how come I was really, really stuck with it when the time come.*

The time did come and for three and twelve years before each woman joined the Senior's Literacy Program, Mary and Fran did not have them to depend upon. As their widowed years advanced, we can feel the full weight of a life-long inertia of personal and social isolation from public practices of literacy begin to give way:

M: *We had our bad times and we had our good times, but we had a heck of a lot more good times. And, he had a saying, what his grandma always said, "Never go to bed without making up because you might not wake up to apologize to one another." His grandma always said those words and he went by them. And it didn't matter how mad he got or anything. "This is enough of this stupidity. Let's go out." So that's what we'd do. So that's how it goes. We all know we're put here to - we stay that long and if our time is here, we go, and that's it. But it seems so mean when it happens.*

Widowhoods

When Mary's husband got sick, she stayed at his side until the end. Her last months and days with him were emotionally and physically exhausting. Up until his death, he, more than any other, remained central to her purpose for living. When he died, she lost her emotional foothold and the busy (and stressful) days of tending to him were left vacuous. It is no wonder that Mary cries and speaks with an embittered anguish of this lonely time in her life. In addition to her husband's illness and death, another family member passed away shortly before him and an in-law, soon after. Mary came down with the flu and her doctor did not allow her to go to her in-law's funeral. She was alone and lonely and feeling resentful that there was no one to turn to for emotional support:

M: *And they thought that after a month I should put my head up as though nothing happened. It's over three years and I miss him as much as the day he left me.*

Neither her family nor friends seemed to understand her pain:

M: *Well, if you've never been in the shoes, you just think, "Oh well. He's gone. It's good he's gone. He had to suffer anyways. Now he doesn't suffer." Sure, he didn't have to suffer, but I suffered. And if anybody comes up to me and says, "Well, Mary, it's good he's gone, at least he isn't suffering." I could just sock them in their face. I'm not glad he's gone.*

After a few years of just barely coping with the loss of her husband of 45 years, Mary joined a support group for widowed women. She would later join the Senior's Literacy Program at the suggestion of a counsellor in that group.

Fran's husband's death was an unexpected and tragic work accident. Her words, if not the matter-of-fact tone of her voice, reveal her dependency on him and suggest how central he was to how she lived out her days. When he died, her children and grandchildren, while always important to her, became central in new ways. At Fran's request, they became the intermediaries between her and the mail she could not understand, and between her and the bank:

F: *After my husband passed away, I'd always have my son-in-law with me, or my daughter. And I'd always get them to go [to the bank with me]. I told her at the bank that she's supposed to talk to him first before he talks to me. I got that worked out...but I'd like to look after it myself.*

For a dozen years, Fran only needed to "sign [her] name" on her cheques. Her children's help with her financial and bureaucratic matters was consistent and generous. They were there for her both when she remained isolated in her home for nearly two years after her husband died, and as she grew accustomed to living on her own.

Fran had never wanted to leave her house because she never wanted to come home alone to its emptiness. Her family and one particular friend regularly visited and regularly encouraged her to get out of the house and do *something*. Her friend's persistent efforts finally paid off when Fran decided to start bowling. Over time, she became quite good and joined a bowling league. She even tried to teach herself how to keep score. The enjoyment she got from bowling helped her realize and accept that she needed other new interests and other new things to do. She got her driver's license. The car her husband bought shortly before his death had been sitting idle in the garage for more than two years. It was time to get it on the road and Fran gained the freedom to come and go as she pleased.

She also began going on bus tours. The tour group was expected to participate in games. One such game included guessing the mileage between two locations. Even if Fran could read a map (and she couldn't), and even if she had a good sense of distance (she may have), it really didn't matter. She was always "asleep" when it was her turn. Similarly, at the end of the trip,

F: *Everybody's got to come to the front and tell what they've learned or anything they want from this trip. 'I'm not going up.' There was a lawyer on there and a doctor on there. 'Poor old me, I don't know. I'm gonna go according to what they're going to say. I don't know. Am I gonna stand up there and act like a dummy.' [Her acquaintance said], "Just don't be shy." 'I'm not shy! But I thought I couldn't [do it].'*

This acquaintance sometimes managed to coax Fran to the front of the bus. Fran was intimidated by the attention she got for not wanting to participate. She was intimidated by the prospect of doing it. It was a no-win situation. When she did finally go to the front of the bus, her acquaintance praised her performance, "Oh, that was very good." But, Fran mistrusted these words, believing instead, that they were said out of pity. "I thought he was just saying it because I thought he thought that I was frightened to death."

2 OF 2

PM-1 3 1/2" x 4" PHOTOGRAPHIC MICROCOPY TARGET
NBS 1010a ANSI/ISO #2 EQUIVALENT

PRECISIONSM RESOLUTION TARGETS

Fran slept during the games and dreaded the talk at the end of each trip because she dreaded getting the answer wrong in front of doctors and lawyers and other educated people - people who naturally get it right. Like her fear of signing her name to funeral registers. Fran dreaded the public face of the act. She felt transparent, as though anyone who saw her knew that she was "unschooled" - "a dummy". If they did not know this before she spoke, they would know it after. Mary too felt "scared that [she] might pronounce things wrong [or] that [she] might make mistakes." This fear of getting it wrong when they had to use print or talk like they used it had always weighed them down and held them back. It kept their voices silent. Now, with their husbands gone and no protective voice or pen to spare them, Mary and Fran came face to face with the very kinds of public practices of print that each spent a life time avoiding.

For Fran, this fear of making mistakes materialized when she hired a contractor to work on the roof of her house.

F: *I told [the bank teller] to transfer \$2,500 and she put in \$25.00 and here the guy comes with the cheque. Non Sufficient Funds - I didn't know what that meant. 'Oh no, it couldn't have.' He said, "The cheque. It bounced. That means you didn't have enough money." 'I have! I really have it!'*

With limited literacy and numeracy skills, and even less knowledge about how a bank worked, she was in no position to ensure that the teller transferred the correct amount of money. Her life-long sense of inadequacy for not getting an education crashed headlong into her perpetual fear of getting it wrong and being found out. She struggled within herself, looked at her options and finally approached her children:

F: *I talked to my children and told them I wanted to go to college, but I won't be able to do it. I didn't think I'd be able to learn anything. Who would want to teach a dummy like me?*

Fran's granddaughter, who had already seen an advertisement for The Senior's Literacy Program, went with Fran to the college.⁵⁰

Unlike Fran, Mary did not experience one single incident so deeply that no choice other than seeking instruction seemed plausible. Rather, with Mary, it was the gradual layering of many, seemingly small, incidents. In the days following her husband's funeral, Mary's daughter helped her "quite a bit." Together, they did ..

M: *...the banking and city taxes, utility and phone bills and all the different things afterwards that would happen, and that. We got everything done real good. The only time I went to a lawyer was when I made my will. Otherwise we had everything. It didn't cost a bunch for the lawyer. He didn't like it very much. It was too bad.. It was too much running around. Nobody thought it was too much. It was go go. I was down too.*

As time passed, her daughter visited less.

M: *My daughter [would] come over and sometimes it took a long time [for her] to decide to come to write out cheques for me and that*

Mary asked visiting relatives for help:

M: *Mail would come in and I wouldn't know what in the world I was reading, or what it was all about or anything...If someone, one of my relations, come, and I asked them, 'What's this all about?' They would say, "Can't you even read your own mail?" So I never asked no more.*

Her relatives were not helpful and her daughter was not visiting as regularly. Mary took the initiative and brought mail to her daughter in the hope of having it explained:

⁵⁰ Fran would later write a narrative of this momentous day. See Work Sample C.

write. By doing math, Fran discovered she could do math and she discovered the gaps in her knowledge. Staring at fractions Fran commented: "I remember doing this in school."

F: *What I learned I must have learned well because there are things I know. But with writing cheques I didn't and with reading, I couldn't. I worked at it.*

And, she wanted to work at it more often. One day a week for two hours was not enough instruction time. Fran needed the reinforcement of ongoing practice and review to retain what she learned in both arithmetic and reading.

F: *I can't . . . the plot is the story, what it is about. Get me a book and I can read it. I can read anything. I can read. But I can read it all over and then [my tutor] will say, "Well?" and I don't know what some of the words mean - and kind of and if you're reading a bigger story - but I've been reading different stories which, if there isn't so many big words, then I can know.*

When Fran read she retained little of the story because she often remained tied to understanding each word. She would forget the beginning of a sentence by the time she got to the end of it. When she was sure she didn't know a word, she looked it up in a dictionary, but then could often not make sense of the definition provided. She approached reading as an exercise in decoding and as far as it went, she was quite good at it. But, letter-by-letter or word-by-word, Fran could not keep the flow of the story in her mind. Her tutor told Fran to just keep reading: "She said to read anything I can read." Fran listened to her tutor's advice: "I read it until I can understand it."

Reading was mostly decoding and writing, at first, was mostly spelling. At Fran's request, her tutor wrote lists of words for Fran to study and be tested on the following week. "I have to study the spelling" she affirmed. "I spell in my writing until I study it. I stayed up till one o'clock." At first the words Fran studied were typical of any grade school speller, but soon, her tutor began to choose words from other aspects of Fran's

Mary was taking twelve different prescription medications for ailments that included arthritis, phlebitis, high blood pressure, diabetes and asthma. She developed a system for making sure that she was taking the right drugs at the right time:

M: *I have a system...If I get new drugs, I ask the druggist what they're all about, and that's how I can take them. I got little cups that I put my medication in for all day. Those little medicine cups from the hospital...I line them up, then I put my medication in - what I need in the morning time, what I take at dinner time...When I check, if they're still in there, I know I didn't take them.*

Some relatives began giving her advice

M: *...especially the kids - well some of the others. [They] said [that] I'm taking too much medication. "Why don't you cut yourself down?" So I cut myself down. I listened to them just so that they're satisfied, but all I had to do was go one more day or two and I'd have been in the hospital. Because all my heart medications and that; they thought I was over-doing on them. And, then a few days later I went to see the doctor and he said, "What did you do to yourself?" So I told him. And he said, "Don't ever, ever cut down on your heart medication unless we tell you to!"*

Mary lives on a government pension in the paid-for home in which she and her husband raised their daughter. She chose to keep the house when her family advised her to sell it. She loves her home, but it is not well-located for going downtown or to church when buses are not always a possible means of transportation. For three years Mary had "to wait on" her daughter or someone else to help her. She had to wait for rides to get her groceries. She had to arrange rides to the bank or doctor's office. Mary appreciates the ride to church that her neighbour gives her each Sunday. Her neighbour goes there regularly anyway. Mary was increasingly faced with dependencies that she could not control. Doing anything on her own "would really be nice". The prospect of increased independence was the hope the literacy program held out for her.

When married, Mary and Fran could suppress their desires for an education and their need to read, write or calculate better. Neither *needed* to improve her skills. The longer she went without using them, the more she came to believe she couldn't use them and that she didn't have them to use.

The circles of their lives could generally exclude banks, colleges, libraries and other public institutions. When the circles had to brush up against these institutions, the women got scared. They feared the spoken language needed to participate in these institutions, and they feared those individuals whose speech represented mastery of its form.

Then their husbands died and the established circles of protection died too. They turned to their remaining family members. Fran's family helped with no questions asked and no privacies betrayed. Mary, on the other hand, became very sensitive to whom she would turn for help. She already felt emotionally isolated from her relatives after her husband's death. She did not want to contend with judgements about her inability to grieve properly or manage her personal affairs.

Regardless how they felt about it, Mary and Fran could get help with their literacy needs, though for Mary this help was not very reliable. Both sought some measure of freedom from this help. They wanted to do with print what others take for granted. Neither was sure she could do it. Neither was sure she could even learn. But the consequences of not trying when the opportunity presented itself loomed much larger than uncertainties connected with trying. They both took the chance and joined the Senior's Literacy Program:

F: *I just didn't know I could do it. Now I know I can. It took an awful lot out of me to go up [to the college] that day. I was just shaking. I'm glad I did.. You know, you put yourself down so much...I got home and I didn't know if I had done the right thing or didn't.*

ii. The Senior's Literacy Program

For as long as Fran can recall, she felt inadequate in arithmetic. She felt this way as a young waitress adding up food bills, as a mother trying to learn big numbers through her children's homework and, now, as an older woman whose cheque bounced. When she started working with her tutor her goals were clear:

F: *I want to work on my math. I'd like to continue so I can really look after my own. As far as I can go, I'd like to go.*

Mary never talked about math. Instead, on her first day in the literacy program, she told her tutor that she was "mostly interested in writing and reading".

M: *I told her that my main goal was so I can read better and write better. So she got words and we read some of them books and we find and break up the words, and how many words you can make out of them and that, and write and separate them.*

Fran has a long term goal of investing some of her savings:

F: *I want to invest money, or [get] a loan, which I don't intend to get, but just in case something like that, that I know what I am signing up for. This is what I want. Because my husband, I'm not telling no one this, I'm just telling you now, when he was still here we put money away and I left that in. In case something happens I have - the kids have money for whatever - budgeting the house - or you know, that I need money...Now [the bank is] writing me all the time that I should invest it because it's - it's gonna be 14 years in October. I've never withdrawn or anything. And I should invest it. And I'm kind of scared because I don't know what to do or how to go about this. And this is what I - now I asked my son-in-law to help me to do this and we did invest some, but I didn't put in too much because I want to know what I'm doing.*

Fran sees arithmetic to be the means through which she would attain these goals. But first she needed to gain confidence in her use of large numbers and how to write them out for cheques.

F: *I had to write these numbers. That's what I was always leery about, you know when you put a great big number-word like one thousand, one hundred and two. Where to put my - and where's the decimal places.*

She spoke about wanting to understand bank statements, insurance papers, cheques and deposit slips. She didn't speak about wanting to understand personal letters. She could do that. It wasn't as important.

F: *Like when I get letters from a friend or something, then I knew all what it was about, but weird things, like with banking, or insurance or anything like that I get all flustered.*

At the age of 61, Fran wanted to manage her own financial affairs. Although she had generous and loving help from her family, she wanted to do it on her own. The bounced cheque confirmed for her the nature of her need and the focus of future instruction.

Mary did not bounce a cheque. Instead, she repeatedly felt powerless to manage her own affairs. She was not, at the very beginning of instruction, quite sure what kind of learning would help her. But on that first day of instruction, she learned that she *could* read. Very soon more concrete possibilities opened to her. Mary, like Fran, wanted to do her own cheques, and for both, writing cheques and having the choice of going to the bank would be among the most meaningful achievements within the literacy program.

In the remainder of this story we follow Mary's and Fran's language and literacy skill development. The process was not always consistent, but each achievement was interconnected with what had been learned already and what each still sought to learn.

The women themselves did not articulate this relational part of their experience. If they had a voice in this regard, it was often confused or misleading.⁵¹

Year One in the Program

When Mary first met her tutor, she could read “a little bit”, though she “never read”. She knew the alphabet and the sounds of the letters. She could decode familiar words with simple spellings if put to the test. When faced with a paragraph, she “couldn’t keep what it was all about”. She never wrote and she drew her signature as though tracing a picture. Her tutor gave her a model of the written alphabet that showed the pen strokes for each letter. Mary began practicing the letters with her tutor, but soon practiced on her own. Before long, Mary began to copy from the high-interest, low-vocabulary stories she and her tutor had already begun to read.⁵² Mary had been in the Senior’s Literacy Program about six months when she read haltingly from one of these high interest, low-vocabulary books. I pointed out to her when she finished the page, “You know how to read. You understand it,” to which Mary responded:

M: *At first I didn’t. I never read or anything. I was doing hobbies and stuff...I could have read [this book before] but not far as good. I couldn’t keep what it was all about, but now it’s getting a lot better.*

Her scribbler lay open on the table. Its pages were filled with her answers to the comprehension questions asked at the end of each chapter of these high-low series. Again, I said to Mary, “I’m trying to understand why you thought to yourself that you couldn’t read or write, but you are reading and writing?” Mary replied:

⁵¹ This is the way S. Jones (personal communication) put it.

⁵² High-interest, low-vocabulary books are books written for adult new readers with adult content. They are often in large print. Mary’s tutor brought these books to the tutoring session from the beginning.

M: *I couldn't hardly read it myself, but now, I am not so tense. I can sit down and let my pen go freely, instead of being scared. "Can they read this if I write it?" and I'd be so uptight about it. I stay at it.*

Mary had always feared print and these anxieties blocked her ability to face the text and tackle it. Now, she is not afraid to pick up a pen and use it. She learned how to approach the task of reading and writing and her fears and tensions lessened. She saw progress in her efforts:

M: *We do crosswords puzzles and different writings and that and then she explains different words and that, which I have to learn a lot to keep that in my mind. And, the dictionary. If I am stuck, I get my dictionary out and I look if I can find that word in there that I'm wanting for in there....I understand more things now.*

In addition, Mary really liked her tutor:

M: *I feel real comfortable with her. The first time I met her I felt so close to her and so comfortable with her and I really thought a lot of her, and I really look forward to her coming....I can talk to her closer than my sister. That's how close we got.*

She never felt pressured by her tutor and she came to learn that making mistakes was not such a bad thing:

M: *I was scared, there, that I might make mistakes and all that. I was kind of worried about it. But now if it doesn't come out right, I'm not worried about it no more. My tutor says even the leaders sometimes don't get everything perfect. She says don't worry about it. I'm really relaxed about it.*

Fran also worried about how she would do with learning. She feared she wouldn't be a good student; she might make mistakes and learn slowly. She placed a

pressure upon herself that heightened her anxiety in the tutoring situation. The encouragement and patience her tutor consistently conveyed helped Fran to relax:

F: *Well, my tutor doesn't push it. She really has patience with me. [I would think to myself] 'Oh no if I don't know how to do it. Maybe she won't like it if I don't get the answer right away,' but she said, "Don't worry about it. You can try it again" - which helped. I went to put up the decimal point up there in the wrong place and she said to put a line down it. She showed me how to do it to get the right answer. She went step by step.*

With her many layers of apprehensions, Fran took a little longer than Mary to feel completely at ease with her tutor:

F: *[My tutor] understands what I went through and what I'm going through. I feel real comfortable with her.*

Arithmetic would remain a large part of what Fran would regularly do with her tutor and on her own. Reading would remain a large part of what Mary would do.

On a typical day, when Mary was not at the doctor's office, church, the support group for widowed women or Bingo, she would be found knitting or crocheting for friends or for her church. As reading stories became a bigger part of her life, it began to consume increasingly more of her free time. Mary would "sooner read" now than crochet. Through the fictional lives and loves of pioneers and cowboys, and cops and crooks, Mary stepped into new worlds of experience:

M: *They're good stories, I enjoyed them. You get going in reading, and then you find so many things - well what's going to happen now, what's going to happen now. It often happens that at two or three o'clock in the morning I'm still reading. I get involved in the story. I want to see what happens in the end, what happens to this one, what happens to that one...It gets your mind working. I never felt sorry once that I listened to [the coordinator]...If you are really down and out you take*

your book and you start reading and before you know your mind is with the book instead of all the other stuff. If I had to do it again, I'm sure I'd do it again. You get more confidence in yourself and everything. I don't have to feel bad I can't do this or can't do that. Something else I learned now.

Mary had enough in her life to feel bad about, but now she began finding new things to feel good about. Once the doors to fiction opened for her, they would never shut. Reading and learning from reading helped Mary to feel more confident and less reluctant to speak her thoughts.

M: *[At the widows' support group] where some of the people say, "Now that you're old [it's] a waste of the government's money [to] learn us how to read and write." A few of the ladies, they need it as bad as I do. Now it's out. It's on TV.⁵³ I don't care. I'll just tell them. I'm not ashamed of it. I'm glad I took it*

Mary applied her reading skills to stories, to mail, and later, to a newspaper for adult new readers. She would continue to build confidence alongside her new abilities, and become more willing to speak her mind. Reading and the knowledge and personal fulfillment that arose from it would be weaved into her days.

At the time that Mary was discovering the joys and rewards of reading, Fran's focus on math and her desire to manage her personal affairs continued. With her desire to know exactly what would happen to her money if she were to invest it, Fran struggled successfully through addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. Eventually, fractions, percentages, and much later, the metric system were introduced to her. She recalled how she came to understand some of her arithmetic.

F: *Subtraction I found pretty good. I couldn't go real fast at it. You know, I had to go slower at it, but she said that if you can add you can subtract. 7 and what is*

⁵³As discussed in the next section, Mary and Fran participated in televised programs that featured the Senior's Literacy Program.

10. It comes out easier that way for me. Then she gave me multiplication. There was a zero in there...I just couldn't get 4×0 . I would always put 4. I just couldn't get 4×0 . And [my tutor] would draw 4 circles with nothing in them - and that's where my mistake was. I work at it. I work and work until I get it. And then I do it over to make sure it's right. I don't use the calculator. She showed me how to do it to check the answer. It was too easy to use the calculator.

When Fran worked alone, she did not have her tutor's timely help. Mistakes would get made and she could not always figure out where they were. At these times, Fran called her granddaughter.

F: *My granddaughter, she comes and helps me an awful lot. She works here. She comes and I've been doing it [and I say] 'I don't know what to do. Should I give up? I don't know what to do. I'm gonna give up.' "Grama, I'll help you." She drew all these things and said "Think Gramma." And you know, it just came to me...And the next night she'd come again and say, "Are you doing it? Show me." Then I'd get a mistake. "Right there it was. That's what you're doing wrong." And then, you know, I caught on. It was real easy...I'm catching on now. If I could do it everyday.*

Fran worked hard on her arithmetic and when understanding came she felt very, very good about it.

F: *I was so proud once I could get on to this. I can do this stuff and I'm gonna show you. You see what I'm doing here...It makes you feel so good when you do something like this...I feel so good. I can do something.*

Fran and Mary picked up momentum in their learning quite quickly. Rather than learning for the first time, Fran and Mary re-activated or discovered latent knowledge they had acquired while in school. They didn't know they had this foundation of literacy skills (even if incomplete or inaccurate), for they hadn't used it for fifty or more years. By reading, they discovered they could read. By writing, they discovered they could

write. By doing math, Fran discovered she could do math and she discovered the gaps in her knowledge. Staring at fractions Fran commented: "I remember doing this in school."

F: *What I learned I must have learned well because there are things I know. But with writing cheques I didn't and with reading, I couldn't. I worked at it.*

And, she wanted to work at it more often. One day a week for two hours was not enough instruction time. Fran needed the reinforcement of ongoing practice and review to retain what she learned in both arithmetic and reading.

F: *I can't read the plot is the story, what it is about. Get me a book and I can read it. I can read anything. I can read. But I can read it all over and then [my tutor] will say, "Well?" and I don't know what some of the words mean - and kind of and if you're reading a bigger story - but I've been reading different stories which, if there isn't so many big words, then I can know.*

When Fran read she retained little of the story because she often remained tied to understanding each word. She would forget the beginning of a sentence by the time she got to the end of it. When she was sure she didn't know a word, she looked it up in a dictionary, but then could often not make sense of the definition provided. She approached reading as an exercise in decoding and as far as it went, she was quite good at it. But, letter-by-letter or word-by-word, Fran could not keep the flow of the story in her mind. Her tutor told Fran to just keep reading: "She said to read anything I can read." Fran listened to her tutor's advice: "I read it until I can understand it."

Reading was mostly decoding and writing, at first, was mostly spelling. At Fran's request, her tutor wrote lists of words for Fran to study and be tested on the following week. "I have to study the spelling" she affirmed. "I spell in my writing until I study it. I stayed up till one o'clock." At first the words Fran studied were typical of any grade school speller, but soon, her tutor began to choose words from other aspects of Fran's

work. Fran's math work progressed from straight arithmetic to arithmetic embedded within written questions. For example, one question from a homework sheet read: Can you change the following fractions to percentages - remember to divide 100 by the denominator and multiply your answer by the numerator. Among the lists of words Fran needed to study that week included: percentage, remember, fraction, multiply, denominator and numerator.⁵⁴ Fran had to understand the question if she were to get her arithmetic answers right and she was highly motivated to get them right.

From the beginning of instruction, Fran and Mary were asked what they wanted to learn. Their tutors helped them develop strategies for approaching the reading or arithmetic tasks that would enable the two women to "stay at it":

F: *You see that's what she asked me, because she said how can I do things so that you can understand. See, she asked me all of those things. I said - examples. With 4 apples and take away none and you got 4 left - then it sunk in. Same things with times. That's how it finally sunk in.*

As keen as Fran was about learning math, so Mary was about reading stories. Mary was not interested in adding and subtracting. As long as her monetary transactions were cash transactions, she could get things done. Problems arose when she needed to write cheques. Though she could draw her name, she couldn't, with confidence, write out the numbers. Problems also surfaced when she got bills or other notices in the mail that were unfamiliar to her. She could read the numbers and knew how much they were, but she couldn't be quite certain which of the numbers on the bill counted:

M: *I had this letter from uh - One place [on the bill] said I owed them \$57.90 and the other place didn't. So I asked my tutor how that worked. So it was they didn't owe it to me, I owed them.*

⁵⁴This work sheet was dated April, 30, 1991. Fran had been with the program approximately four months.

Almost immediately, she tried to understand her mail:

M: *When a letter comes or something comes in, I can figure out more than I used to, which I'm really glad.*

The two women also began to write. Mary's note of appreciation to the coordinator of the program was written within months of instruction (Work Sample B, below). Fran's first attempt (Work Sample C, following page) was similarly motivated. Clearly, Fran and Mary could write. Fran wrote Work Sample D (page 104) just months later.

Work Sample B: Note of Appreciation (Mary)

February, 1991

*Thank to Helen Appleton
for what is done for me.
I am very happy that
I am getting help to read
and write.
And I love the teacher a
tutor. She gave me
Jean Dirb.
I hope that I will be a
good student for her.
I will do my best.*

Work Sample C: A Special Day in My Life (Fran)

March 18, 1991

A Special Day in My Life

On November thirteen my grand daughter and I went to
the college
I wanted to see a counsellor to find out how I could
get a tootow or how would I go about learning math
and everything so I can look after my affairs myself
I was so ^{nervous} nervous, I was so afraid I wouldn't be
able to learn.

First we ^{see} seen a young man. his name was Jerry, had
a nice talk with him then he took us over to see

Dec 3 Mrs Appleton then brought Betty ^{Morisset} Morisset to my
house as my ~~tootow~~ tootow

Mrs ^{Morisset} Morisset ^{had} been here eleven times and I have been

That's why this is my special day in my life ^{alot}
cause people really care.

Work Sample D: Coal Miners Daughter (Fran)

May 21, 1991

Coal Miners Daughter

Loretta Lynn was the daughter of a coal miner
She left home at age thirteen to marry a man
much older than her.

His name was Morsey. Loretta called him Doc little
- she came home again at age fourteen and was pregnant
Doc little wasn't a very nice person, he didn't seem to
realize how young she was and she didn't know very
much especially about married life

Sad thing was by the time she was sixteen he
had four babies

They were very poor and didn't have much. they were
so poor they lived in dirty hotels and old cars and
ate wherever they could

This was when she was trying to get on stage to sing
Loretta liked to sing and said, someday I will sing
on stage

When they finally came to Nashville the people there
called them hill billy singers at that time they didn't
give country music any respect.

With all the trouble this girl went through she now
is on top making records, getting awards.

And her children are all grown up and also
she is grandma now.

Reading about this girl
Makes a person realize if you want to do something don't
... no matter what ... (Cause you can do it.)

Trust, comfort and rapport with their tutors minimized the apprehensions towards reading and writing felt by Fran and Mary. Within the safety of their homes, the two began to tap into knowledge that had been latent for half a century. They began to fill in gaps and address misperceptions. As they did so, they began to gain confidence and feel quite good about themselves:

M: *It really gives you a good feeling to know you can do a lot of these things. You don't think you can but after a while you find out that you really can, and it really makes you feel good about it.*

Fran felt strongly that lacking arithmetic, more than reading and writing, kept her from being able to manage her personal affairs. As she began to figure out the answers to questions and get them right, she progressed quickly. Her tutor had already begun to set her math questions into written questions. Over time the questions became more real to life and banking transactions were incorporated into them (Work Sample E, following page). Fran began to learn the language of banks. Work Samples F, G, and H (page 107) are examples of a fictitious cheque, deposit slip and withdrawal slip, respectively.

Fran progressed from simple arithmetic questions to banking problems within three to four months. Clearly, Fran knew much more than she thought she did. Like Mary with her reading, Fran began to test and apply her knowledge in other areas of her life. In the public but familiar realm of a department store, armed with the confidence of being able to write a cheque and add properly and feeling secure with her daughter standing beside her, this story unfolded:

Work Sample E: Banking Problem (Fran)

Bank forms:

I've been collecting the cash earned at a bazaar and must now deposit it into the Community Club's account. The correct name on the account is Rose Glen Community Club and the account number is 1035351 at the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce. Please complete a deposit slip for the following amounts of money:

Cash:	4	twenty dollar bills	80.00
	21	ten dollar bills	210.00
	42	five dollar bills	210.00
	40	two dollar bills	<u>80.00</u>
	50	loonies	50.00
	36	quarters	9.00
	101	dimes	10.10
	18	nickels	<u>.90</u>
			650.00

F: *I can do things more now than what I used to - like with adding and that. I went to The Bay and there were towels on [sale]. They had great big towels on from \$18.95. I bought five of them and they had queen size sheets on for \$35.00. I got a set of them. They had wash cloths on for \$2.88. The regular price was \$7.99. I got a dozen of them...I wrote out a cheque to pay for them. I said to my daughter if I did it right. I looked at the bill. They added it all up and the Bay charged \$155.00. That was way over what I had. I went back to the cash. 'I'm sure there's a mistake.' And the lady said that it's on the computer. She looked on it and said, "Yes, I'm right." I said, 'You couldn't be because that's what I got. Towels from \$18.95 to \$8.88, and \$2.88 for the wash cloths.' She phoned someone to make sure. She said that I was right. She took it all off. I could have just left. So I felt pretty good about that. I did something really good today. I thought about it all the way home. Even though we had to wait a long time. And the number was on the computer. So I sure felt good about it. . Before, I never would have checked.*

For the first time ever, Fran controlled the monetary exchange, not a computer and not a sales clerk.

The achievements that Fran, as well as Mary, talked about most enthusiastically were those that made a difference in what each could do now that she could not do before. Fran also learned how to keep score at bowling:

F: *Anybody comes when we go bowling and they say, "Well who's gonna keep score?" and "Who would like to keep score?" ...And right away I say, 'Oh I'd love to. I'll keep score.' I love to keep score...It makes me feel good.*

As Fran learned how to keep score at bowling, Mary wrote her own Christmas cards for the first time ever:

M: *Last Christmas was the first time I sat down and I thought, I am going to sit down and write them up myself. I'm not going to wait for nobody to come and do it. So I made up a little list, and I asked my tutor what she thinks about it, "Oh that's*

great!" So I wrote them all out and away they all went. So my sister-in-law phoned and said, "Mary, did you do those cards?" I said, 'Yes.' "Hooray!" she says. I said, 'It's going to get better next year.' I'll send her a better one next year with more writing in it!

Her audience for writing extended from the confines of the literacy program, to her family and friends, none of whom she had yet told about her involvement in the program.

M: *I get library books! It's the first time in my life I've got a library book! I'm really happy about it and I feel better about myself and everything.*

She later remarked:

M: *I have to go down to the library tomorrow - No, the next day is the deadline for them.*

Mary's tutor took Mary to the library. Mary learned where in the library to find the books that she could read. She learned how to renew books by phone, citing the bar code numbers. Mary has learned how libraries work and she has learned how to make libraries work for her. Although she normally went with her tutor, she would also go alone.

During our conversations, tendencies towards modesty were swept aside by the momentum of each woman's personal satisfaction in her accomplishments. When Mary and Fran joined the Senior's Literacy Program each wanted to do more by herself and within months each had begun doing more. With each success, Mary and Fran increasingly began to count themselves among those who can learn and have learned, and among those who are *readers* and *writers*. This is more than what they had asked for.

Into Year Two

Within a year of learning in the program, Mary and Fran participated in two televised shows featuring the Senior's Literacy Program. The first was a local cable program, and the second, a national program.⁵⁵ A short while after the filming, Mary wrote about her experience (Work Sample I, following page). Nearly three months of instruction had taken place between the time that Mary wrote the note to the coordinator (Work Sample B) and this narrative on the video (Work Sample I, below). Clearly, the foundation of her skills were much stronger than even she had realized and her ability to express herself had grown significantly. Similarly, in a short period there had germinated a desire to speak on her own behalf. It was in the context of talking about the first video that Mary asserted:

M: *..Now it's out. It's on TV. I don't care. I'll just tell them. I'm not ashamed of it I'm glad I took it.*

Both Mary and Fran were guests on this local cable program. Mary felt strongly enough about her achievements that she told "the world" her story. She had not yet told her family. Many people she knew saw the show and many comments were encouraging:

M: *There's a lot of people that I know like they stop and say, "Well, we seen you on TV. "Oh it was wonderful," they said, and "It takes a lot of guts to do it." That's what a lot of my friends said to me...One of my sister-in-laws, she seen me the first time on that Literacy Program. She was telling me how wonderful she thinks it is. She figured I was doing something because I was getting better than I used to be.*

⁵⁵They would ultimately be involved in three television programs. The last one was a segment of a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation television series that focusses on issues relevant to older Canadians.

Work Sample I: Story about Video Filming (Mary)

April 25, 1991

I was all excited on the morning of April 11, 1991, when [my tutor] and I went to [the coordinator's] home for a TV interview.

How interesting it was to watch them setting up the lights and the camera on a tripod. They clipped microphones on us and taped the wire to the chairs. They had to move the plant.

First my tutor and I did compound words. Then we read "City for Ransom". Daron filmed first from the front of us and then at the back of us.

And then they set up the camera in the front room for the interview. Ray asked how I like the tutoring. I told him that it is all very exciting. I am happy that I could get help to read and write and I know it would be nice for more people to do it. It sure makes me very happy to sit down with a book and read. Then Ray interviewed [my tutor] and asked her about the program. She said many nice things about me how I was doing with it. Thank you [tutor].

I had a big surprise before we left they gave me a gift wrapped with orange and silver paper and big orange bow. And inside of it was a large print Dictionary. What a surprise to get a gift from people the first time I met them.

Others, however, seemed not to understand how she could live for seventy years without being able to read or write well, or pay her own bills. Mary's smile and tone of self-satisfaction were replaced by a mixture of defiance and defensiveness when she asserted "I'm learning to read and write!" She continued:

M: *At any other time, I never could have said it. I didn't get much school. At first I was kind of scared saying it to anybody and that, but now I don't mind. When it was on TV here about that I only had about grade four, there were some of them [that] remarked about it, "How come you didn't" and all that, but I says it just wasn't. I don't know if I was thirteen or fourteen, but I had to stay home already.*

In a sense, Mary publicly announced her private difficulties and this act represented the culmination of all that she had so far learned and the open-ended possibilities of learning that still lay ahead of her. For her and Fran (who participated anonymously) it was also a way to thank the program and help others in their shoes:

F: *It was quite something for me. I think it was kind of a shocker. Because I was getting help and I really appreciate that. And I thought that I would try to help the next person. Because there is so many like I was. They are afraid to do anything.*

About six months and a summer of intermittent instruction lay between this local television program and a second, national one. Fran, who remained anonymous during the first video, and reluctant to let anyone outside her family know about her involvement in the literacy program, was now ready to show her face for the second program. She and her tutor were to deposit and then withdraw some money for the banking scene that the film crew wanted. Fran's fear of banks had tempered. She had already been going to the bank on her own when needed, though she was still ill at ease:

F: *I feel comfortable on my own. The only thing [is] that I look around and see if there's anybody I know. That's what I find so hard. Otherwise I can do it. But I keep looking around now: Is there somebody I know? And if there's somebody I know, I won't go there till that person goes out and [then] I'll go up there and do it. Now why I do that, I don't know. After I go up, then I'm fine. I went the day before yesterday to the bank. I went in and saw somebody behind the counter. I*

looked around and there was nobody that I knew. And I went up there and I did it all right

The week before the filming, Fran worked on a banking problem that included doing a deposit slip. Part of that question is included in previous Work Samples (E, F). The day before the filming, Fran and her tutor went to the bank to do a trial run. The practice would help Fran feel more confident when the camera lights came on the following day. When she and her tutor rehearsed the deposit and withdrawal scene, Fran "got it wrong". She did not know that the words *less cash received* referred to the money she was taking back out, and not the money the bank was taking in. She did not know "who the words were talking to". She was not fumbled by the words themselves. She could read and understand them. She had practiced them just the week before. What Fran did not know was from whose perspective the words on the deposit slip were written—hers or the bank's. When they did the video the following day Fran did "just fine" having learned whose was the voice of the written words.

Fran prefers to focus on the good that she hopes will come from sharing her story with people she will never meet:

F: *I thought inside, there was one part of me that really felt good...I was so glad to help someone else because I know what I'm going through. And I want those people to know they can do it no matter how old or young they are and they should try.*

Her voice softened when she continued:

F: *But then I'm always thinking what's the next person going to say. I shouldn't do that, I know...I always think that, though. And right away, it's hard. When I come home from it, I hope I helped a lot of people. Because I didn't really have my education. And you need more than just writing your name and reading a few things. There's a lot more to it which is personal.*

Fran, like Mary with the local video, now found herself facing contrary comments from other older adults. A remark such as, "What are you going to school for at your age .. - go into nurses aid or something?" was "another blow" to her. But, she wouldn't let these kind of blows knock her down as much anymore.

F: *They think that [you're] going in for something, like to learn for, what would you say - a teacher or lawyer or something, and you're not. You're going in to help yourself. And a lot of them think well if I'm going now, [I'm] going in for something. I'm not. It's to improve your own.*

Fran's view of what reading and writing are and what they entail was changing. When I first conversed with Fran, she "couldn't read" and "didn't write" and "couldn't learn". Reading was decoding and pronouncing words properly, and writing was spelling and penmanship. And in all cases, one had to look like they knew what they were doing. As she gradually came to know what she was doing, she came to see that the little reading she did, still counted as reading and that writing her name counted as writing. She also saw how much more she needed to know. To get it right she needed to know how to spell, how to see the form or prose as a whole *and* she needed to understand from whose perspective it was written. Without that last piece of knowledge, all the decoding and understanding of written text in the world would not help her get it right.

Fran came to see that she was never the non-reader she believed herself to be. When she first started in the literacy program, she wanted to work on her math and go as far as she could with that. Her long term goal was to manage her financial affairs. With the accumulation of new learning and confidence, Fran's goals expanded into ones of general self improvement. In our last visit together, Fran eloquently voiced this:

F: *I'll go as far as I can to see how far I can go.*

The women were on television and they were in the newspaper. Both local and national papers headlined their stories. Fran was quoted in one column saying that she "could have killed herself". She shakes her head when she tells me this, for she is sure she didn't say that and she wished it wasn't written there. Mary too has a regret about one of the videos. She mistakenly said she had "no" education. It was a point her family was quick to bring to her attention. For better or worse, Mary and Fran were in the public eye.

After doing the first television program Mary chose neither to hide nor advertise her involvement in the literacy program. She never did tell her daughter directly about the help she was getting. Some months went by before her daughter asked Mary...

M: *"Mom, who does all your cheques and everything? Who have you got doing them for you?" I said, 'I don't need nobody doing them for me, I do them.'* "Oh." *That's all she said.*

Mary reflects on her experiences from the second film:

M: *They asked me all kinds of questions like...how it started and all of that, and they really thought it was good. And they said, "Well what does your family think about it?" I told them that they never knew...My kids haven't said nothing until today about it. They haven't said nothing [like] "Well mom, it's a good thing you did that," or anything. They never said nothing yet, and I don't say nothing. When they're around I just leave it...If they want to know about it, they'll ask me.*

Mary hoped for affirmation of her efforts, especially from her daughter. She wished her daughter would show more interest and show some support. Instead, her daughter was, at best, indifferent to Mary's efforts.

The videos seemed to have accelerated Fran's and Mary's acceptance of themselves. It also seems that Mary and Fran felt a part of something larger than themselves and wanted to contribute to the momentum of this bigger movement.

Mary continued to get great enjoyment from reading. Over her second year in the program her progress with reading, while ongoing, had a new dimension incorporated into it. In the beginning of her reading, Mary would read a story and then re-read it later. She got as much enjoyment out of it the second time around because she often couldn't remember everything that had happened the first time round. Over the second year, Mary would simply show a book and summarize the plot of the story. She was remembering much more of what she had read:

M: *The [stories] start out with something that is happening, then you've got to read to find everything out. This here is about a couple that got married and took a - on their motor bike - they took their dog out and they went on a honeymoon and her mom was so against it she thought they were crazy to go on a motor bike with their dog...There's always different sections.*

She was also absorbing how the formulaic stories that she was reading were structured. Mary came to know what to expect out of a story. And, she also began reading aloud with greater intonation and more expression. Mary began to pay attention to punctuation. Her tutor never explicitly taught these points to Mary, although sometimes she modelled good reading:

M: *Sometimes she reads, I read or we read together.*

Moreover, Mary began to read outside of her home. She brought something to read with her while she waited in the doctor's office. She brought a book with her on a train trip to Regina - a trip she made alone. She smiled, recounting this experience:

M: *I had so many books out already since I got a library card. At first that's what I had was those little books, and then when I go away I put one in my purse [for] the drive - like here I went to Regina and I took some along to read on the train. I didn't get much reading done on the train because on the way down I had a little old lady who really wanted to talk and oh, she talked and talked and on the way home was the same thing.*

As reading became a means of personal fulfillment, writing became a means of personal expression. In addition to the Christmas cards of the first year, Mary sent family and friends Easter cards the following year and did Christmas cards "with more writing in them", just as she had said she would. A story she wrote with her tutor, called "The Dust Storms in the 1930s" was printed in *English Express*, a plain language newspaper for adult new readers of English (Work Sample K, page 119). Mary didn't mind when the story was edited "just a little for people to read it easier and that." She was too pleased with herself and with the fact that they "really thought that much of it to put it in the paper".

Mary extended the audience of her personal story through the video. She extended the contexts in which she would read by reading outside her home; and, she extended the audiences of her writing to those she did not know. In general, people she did not know scared her a little less. She would go to the bank if she had to, but normally preferred to write her cheques at home and have them mailed:

M: *I just go ahead and I do them and get them out. Like, if I can't mail them, [my tutor] mails them for me. I feel more confident in myself that I can do things, write, and do cards and write out my cheques. When I have to write cheques out, I sit down and write them out and away they go...I don't go to none of the family to get things filled out...I can do a lot of it on my own now, which I never did before...It feels so good that I can do it myself. I don't have to wait on anybody.*

Mary wrote cheques and stories and then letters. Faced with pending cutbacks to prescription medications and other subsidies for seniors in her province, Mary wrote a letter to the government expressing her appreciation of the financial help she gets: (Work Sample J).

Work Sample J: Government Letter (Mary)

Dear Premier Mr. Getty:

I am a senior living by myself in my own home. I could not manage if the government did not help me. I am very thankful for the medicare, homecare and the rebased property tax, and all the other things. My health is not so good. I have to take a lot of medicine. It costs me a month from \$100 to \$130, with 20%. I could not be able to pay 100%. I wear dentures and could not afford to pay for new teeth now.

After reading this letter, Mary commented:

M: *I don't know if we're going to add more to that now. We started it when [my tutor] was here, on a different piece of paper, so I copied it out on this, so I can see if she thinks it good enough or we should revise it.*

Mary received a reply from the Premier's office, as well as one from the local Member of the Legislative Assembly. She displayed her letters triumphantly, seemingly unaware that they were a means of putting her off and quieting her concern. She did not read them. She did not seem interested in reading them, but she had them and having them

Work Sample K: The Dust Storms (Mary)

The dust storms in the 1930s

Glenbow Archives NA 1831-1

This dust storm was near Lethbridge in 1942.

I remember the dust storms in the 1930s. I was just a young girl. I went to school and helped mom at home. When the family got up in the morning, it would be nice. Later in the day, there would be dust storms.

Sometimes the dust storms lasted for days. There were times when you couldn't see the barn.

The sand would be all over the house. In those days, the houses were not

built like now. The windows and doors did not fit well, and the sand blew in the cracks. The house was all cleaned in the morning, but by evening it would be as dusty as before.

We had to walk home from school. We hung on to the smaller children so that the wind would not blow them down. We couldn't see the road. The dust made our faces sore.

Medicine Hat

attested to the fact that the government did write back. She was right. Her relatives, who told her she would "never get an answer", were wrong. Pointing from letter to letter as she spoke, Mary excitedly said:

M: *And see, Mr. Getty, they sent me this book. This here - all the different things you're allowed and that. They had this in this envelope. From [MLA] Horsman. I got that first, and then I got that from Mr. Getty. I didn't think I was goin' to get one but he sent me one. Here, this is all he had put in - all the stuff you're allowed and all of that. That there's from Mr. Getty and this is - dated the 29th and that one is dated the 30th. A few days later I got that.*

Mary and Fran learned how to learn through print. Successes with print, both in private and public, became central to each woman's everyday life. The first step in all of these successes entailed having a trusted person at each woman's side. Confidence with the written word and confidence in themselves were mutually evolving aspects of their personal growth, and language and literacy development.

Into Year Three

Fran and Mary entered the Senior's Literacy Program with hopes of doing more for themselves. Within a year, these hopes had a foundation in reality. Both were writing cheques and choosing whether or not they would go into a bank. Both were reading and writing short prose. Mary remained consistently interested in reading. At the time of the last interview she began to contemplate writing her life story. Fran continued to keep score at bowling, and won six trophies over the next year. She estimated the cost of purchases before the total appeared on the cash register and began to use discount flyers when she shopped.

Early achievements were important milestones for Fran and Mary and they built the foundation for future learning goals that would be set and met. They were concrete

symbols attesting to each woman's ability to learn, understand, mediate and create through print. They were the jubilant triumphs of our first conversations and they contrasted sharply to the plainer expressions and subdued tones of our final conversations. Indeed, the enthusiasm had waned and what was once energetic momentum came to have the aura of the everyday. With writing cheques Fran just noted, "To write out cheques and do - all this I know now." For Mary, who took satisfaction in self reliance, stated "Well, I don't have to wait on my daugh* . or anyone any more." almost as a matter of course.

Prior to the final interview with Mary, it came to my attention that she had done a price comparison for her house insurance. Mary did not mention this incident spontaneously, so I asked her about it directly:

M: *With my insurance, [my tutor] thought my house insurance was too high. So I went here and I phoned different ones last year to see where I could get it cheaper. And I phoned my insurance and told them if they don't go down I'll - I've got another one and I'll take that. I get it at less, and I got it less from them too. And, this year they even dropped ten dollars. And before that I never did it.*

I also had to ask the two women about their attendance at year-end luncheons with the Senior's Literacy Program, as well as their participation in a conference for learners. Fran's first experience at the year-end luncheon was nerve-wracking. She saw a woman, who was a retired teacher and with whom she sometimes bowled, and said to her as if she didn't belong, "What are you doing here?" Fran was embarrassed by her own actions and wanted to leave the luncheon. The following year Fran attended the year-end luncheon without her tutor, and she "didn't care about who was there."

Mary, who mentioned the luncheons only in passing, was a little more animated when I asked her about the learner conference. She was referring to Fran when she remarked:

M: *They asked me and they asked the other one, what was her name? And she had learned so much too and she had never cashed a cheque in her life or anything either, and they asked us different things...When my husband passed away, I had never wrote all the cheques or anything, or paid any kind of bills or something. If there were bills, he went and paid them and everything else, and now I do that myself. I go here, write out the cheques and get [my tutor] to check them to make sure that I have them right, and then if it's not, then we just tear that one up and she shows me where's my mistake, and then I rewrite it.*

Mary now has a choice about whether or not she will make the effort to go to the bank. She still might depend on her tutor to look them over "just to make [herself] feel better", but she does not have to depend on her daughter or other relatives for this task. Fran explains how she is less willing to hold herself back in this way:

F: *I don't know how to explain it. You do things [that] otherwise you wouldn't. I don't know how to put it. Like a lady was making clothes hangers and she had so many and I never done that before, but she showed me how, and...the next day ...we went up and made a clothes hanger. There's things I would do now.*

Fran's family never seemed to mind helping her when she needed help. Still, she feels better that she can do some of these things on her own, especially since her family had become increasingly busy with their own work and lives. Despite her ability to do routine banking on her own, latent feelings of inadequacy continue to linger:

F: *Well, it's much better, but I still - back there somewhere is still - that I'm uneducated. I feel much better about it, but it's a - I can't explain how... Because I often wonder if could have really gotten the education, what I would do. That often bothered me. I thought no, I don't want to think of what could've been.*

Mary and Fran have shed some layers of their fears and are willing to risk a mistake in public as they do so:

M: *I'm more [apt to] speak sooner about this and that and all that. I'm not scared that I might pronounce things wrong and that. I got over that. I don't feel quite so...scared that I might make mistakes and all that.*

They became less afraid of learning new things, of making mistakes and of speaking their minds:

M: *Well, I says, 'I think the time has come. You guys could say sometimes, "Well we're going here or there, would you like to come with us?"' And she just looked at me [and said], "What made you say that?" I says, 'Well, because it's true.' She didn't say too much no more. They know I don't drive I shouldn't have to keep asking.*

Mary especially came to listen to and rely upon her own inner resources:

M: *I don't let them run all over me like I used to. I used to just take everything and then I'd come home and have a good cry about it. But I don't do that no more. I say the heck with them, why should I sit and cry just because they think they know better than I do. I know what's best for myself and that, and then they used to tell me what I should do and what I shouldn't do, but I know myself what I should do and what I shouldn't do. I just let it go by and that's it.*

Acting, talking and living more independently has come with a price:

M: *I don't take everything to heart. I sit down and I just say, 'Well if that's what you think, OK.' Like my sister, she phoned me every day to see how I was and everything, but now I don't know what happened to her [She stopped phoning] ...Why should I worry about it? That's what I had to do and accept. There are times when it really hurts, different things, but not like it used to. And then they all said, "Oh we have to leave her on her own - to get used to [doing things] on her own." 'Well if that's what you want to do, do it!'*

She knew that the changes in herself were good even if most members of her family didn't support her. Instead of staying hurt over the difficulties, Mary got angry. She sees now how so much of her life had been determined by others for her. Although she accepted dependence on her husband, not fully knowing what its implications would be, she was much less willing to accept dependence on her family. This was especially so given the emotional costs they were demanding.

M: *There were times [that I got sick] and I didn't phone for anybody. I just stayed here by myself, and then got up and took my pills. If I need nitro,⁵⁶ I have it by my bedside. I sit up and take them, and sit. And they say, "How come you didn't phone that you were so sick?" I says, "I phoned once, what happened?" Since then I haven't phoned. I got so sick one night and then I phoned my sister. And then the other [sister] said, "You know she had to go to work. Why did you phone her?" After that I never phoned nobody yet. I just try to do it on my own and that's it. They were kinda scared [that] I [would] get into the habit of - as soon as I don't feel good I would phone somebody. But I won't. If I really need help...I got that machine. I press that button. If I can crawl to the door to make it - to open it up on my own, I'll do it.*

Mary began challenging the kinds of relationships that always held her back. When she had much less confidence and habitually depended on others, she was always indebted and always vulnerable. Now, with a few more choices and a little more power in her corner, Mary was unwilling to trade in her self respect for the dubious security her family offered.

M: *I have learned what I did. If I haven't got the chance to learn any more, I have really improved myself. Things look brighter. They don't look so dull as they did in the beginning. I make sure I get over - I've got friends to take me over, and I make sure I pay my utility, phone bill, cable vision and all that I do that on my own.*

⁵⁶Nitro is the common term for nitroglycerine, a medication that dissolves on the tongue and thins the blood.

Fran, however, always enjoyed the full emotional support and encouragement of her family. Her daughter was there when she needed help with a cheque. Her son-in-law was there to mediate between her and the bank, and her granddaughter or niece helped her with her arithmetic problems. When we spoke together for the last time, her voice, though strong in personal affirmation of her accomplishments, softened as she continued:

F: *Finished with multiplication. Finished with subtraction. I'm finished with adding. I can do those real good. I got into percentage pretty good too, but...I feel now I'm not learning as quickly as I used to.*

And,

F: *I felt with my math, adding, subtraction and division - I caught onto it quite fast. But with this now, it seems, especially with the metric and all that - it goes in here and comes out here. It just doesn't sink in.*

Fran always needed repetition and practice. She preferred to practice both on the day of instruction, and on the one or two days following it. When she began in the program she depended on her family for this reinforcement of her learning. Her family is now in a position where they can't help as much as they once could:

F: *There was always some help. Day or night there was always someone to help. The next day if I didn't know how, I'd phone and [my grand daughter] would come down here or else my daughter would come. And they would - right away. Now everybody's gone. She's working there and my daughter's so busy at the hospital. My niece is working at the hospital now, and I don't get that extra help. If I would maybe have it more than once a week - a tutor come in.*

At the same time that Fran's help was too busy to respond to her continuing needs, Fran and her tutor were coming to see that Fran is ready for something more:

F: *[My tutor] was saying she didn't know what to give me anymore...I feel I should have more than one day a week. [She] feels that she's not doing. She's helped me an awful lot, but I feel I need more than that. I think I would catch on more than with what I got.*

Her tutor encouraged her to try an upgrading course at the college, and Fran was pleased that her tutor had this faith in her, but college still scared Fran too much for her to believe she could be successful there. Fran likes working with another older adult and she would work with another one if that person could come more often. In fact, Fran would now consider working with a small group of seniors as long as she didn't feel pressured to be better than anyone. But as it was, she began to show frustrations with the slower pace of her learning:

F: *Last month [my tutor] came and she showed me how to do something and I was doing it. Then I got a phone call and I had to go somewhere and when I come back, and when I didn't come home for three days, I just couldn't do it. I tried so hard. I tried. And then you get frustrated and then you draw a blank and then you just have to leave it. And then the next day I don't know how to do it. Well if she [could] come the next day I [would] have to know how to do it.*

Fran is beyond the point of re-learning what she once knew and filling in the gaps. She needed a tutor to rely on more often. Mary seemed reluctant to try another tutor. She was very pleased with the one she had although they were no longer meeting regularly:

M: *The reading part had to level off because of not feeling good and getting those headaches and that. But any time I can, I still go ahead. I still go and get my*

books from the library and all of that and I wouldn't give up [my tutor] for anything in the world.

I left that last meeting with the feeling that Mary was finished with the program, and that she would rather not continue if it meant changing tutors. She had met her goals. She was reading and writing better and doing more on her own.

Mary's and Fran's lives are richer now. As the circumstances of each woman's life changed, and her rate of learning also changed, what they had learned already remained unchanged. It was now a part of who they were. The foundation from which each looks out onto the world and into herself is better than the one that was there before.

M: *[Some of my family] thought it was a waste of the government's money, some of them did. It was just a waste of government money for the few years that you're living. "Why would you wanna take that?" I said, 'It doesn't matter if I'm living three years or ten years or whatever. I won't forget those things any more.' I know I can go ahead and do.' Oh, sure, they're not great big things that I can go ahead [and do] but I can go ahead and do - like writing out my cheques and all of those things. Nobody would ever take that away from me!*

F: *Well, when I read literacy for seniors, I thought, I'm not illiterate. I can read. I can write. I can subtract. But you need more than that. Much more than that. And a lot of people here thinking you don't. When you are by yourself, [if] you have your partner, fine, it may help you. But often you don't. You have to realize that you may be alone someday.*

Chapter 4

Analysis and Intrepretation

Fran and Mary did not learn how to read and write very well as children. Their lives subsequently unfolded in ways that enabled circumvention of their literacy needs. Depending on the literacy skills of others is a well documented compensatory strategy for potential and participating adult literacy students of any age (Fingeret, 1983a; Freet, 1994; Heisel & Larson, 1984). Fingeret argues that this compensatory strategy does not necessarily reflect negatively upon other areas of adults' lives, and those who cannot read or write well are not generally incompetent. Practitioners in adult literacy and basic education would agree. Nevertheless there is sufficient information to suggest that many adults do experience adverse effects from not being able to read and write well (e.g., Bossart, Cottingham & Gardner, 1994; Fingeret & Danin, 1991; Quigley, 1993). As often as not, however, negative impacts of not reading and writing are inferred from positive differences that literacy learning makes. A cursory glance through compilations of students' writings provides a striking testament to these differences (e.g., Burger, et al 1992), as do Fran's and Mary's stories.

Fingeret and Danin (1991) found that students wanted to learn (and many did learn) how to use forms in context (e.g. to deposit money in a bank) and generally participate in practices of literacy that others take for granted. Bossart et al (1994) found many positive influences on literacy students' lives and self perceptions. In addition to learning how to read, write or calculate better, many indicate that they have learned how to study and learned how to learn. Other examples of social and psychological impacts include: a love for learning; an increased strength to accept own and other's mistakes, a new self assuredness that enables them to try new things; a willingness to put forth their point of view; increases in self awareness and identity; a regaining of personal integrity, a

more developed sense of well-being; and, increased expectations and a new sense of what is possible in the future (See also, Charnely & Jones, 1979; Fingeret & Danin, 1991).

Not reading and writing can deprive one, whether older or younger, of the educational and socio-affective benefits that normally fall out from learning to read and write. The paths being forged today by potential adult literacy students who rely on the literate help of others may appear helpful in the short term. They may be articulated in a way that emphasizes their strengths and contributions -- what they provide in return; but, it is unlikely that this help is in their best interests, either in the short term or the long term. The life-span perspective of Fran and Mary provides sufficient grounds to question whether literacy is or should be part of "reciprocal exchange relations" of instrumental skills, knowledge and resources (Fingeret, 1983a).

Fran and Mary demanded that I understand why, at their ages, each would be in a literacy program. The questions organizing this chapter found shape in this understanding:

- i. How did Fran and Mary reach late adulthood with limited literacy skills?
- ii. Why did they join the Senior's Literacy Program *now*?
- iii. How has literacy learning affected their lives?

To understand the negative impacts of a life without literacy and how social networks might encourage, maintain or discourage limited literacy, two social constructs are used: being 'woman' and being 'educated' within this society. When we consolidate Fran's and Mary's experiences, contrasting and comparing them not only with one another, but with other lines of research, we begin to see how these social constructions, differentially endorsed by social networks and broader social discourses, helped shaped their perceptions. We can see, too, what each woman thought possible within her circumstances, (both now and when younger).

i. How did Mary and Fran reach late adulthood with limited literacy skills?

Two converging lines of analysis provide the most insight into understanding how the women in this study could live into late adulthood without adequate skills for managing many of their everyday literacy needs. The first line looks at their formative experiences as females socialized into traditional roles: A socialization process endorsed both within their social networks and broader societal norms. The second looks at their childhood experiences of school: A normative socializing process that did not mesh with those found within their immediate social networks. Both threads in their lives converged to keep Mary and Fran marginalized from dominant socio-cultural practices and relations of literacy. Before expounding upon these relations further, the ways in which Fran and Mary account for their limited schooling as children and for not returning to school as adults are summarized.

Why hadn't Mary and Fran learned to read or write well as children?

Mary and Fran were not at school long enough or often enough to have learned how to read and write very well. Both left their rural schoolhouses by the time they were fourteen years old. Mary thinks she left in grade four while Fran knows she failed grade seven. Level of schooling alone cannot account for their limited literacy skills. Some adults with limited schooling do read and write adequately, and a few may do so quite well (Statistics Canada, 1995). When we look at the reasons each woman provides we note such things as long walks, bad weather and helping out at home as causes outside of their immediate control that resulted in intermittent attendance and (in Mary's case) staying home completely. Within the classroom, but still external to the women's control, were factors such as large, multi-grade classes. That each woman spoke German, and not English, made for a slow start to the learning and learning to read process. A "mean" teacher made Mary too scared to absorb what was being taught, while

Fran's teacher seemed too overworked to notice, let alone provide the extra attention needed for Fran to compensate for missed classes. These latter reasons are among the reasons that deterred their entrance into formal adult literacy programs as adults.

Why didn't they return to school as married adults?

As married and widowed women, both Fran and Mary knowingly lived without sufficient literacy skills, yet took little or no action to rectify this educational shortcoming. The reasons they give for not improving their literacy skills through formal adult literacy programming while they were adults include:

- 1) **Busy lives:** "After I got married and had my children, then the time for school went out...Raising a family kept my mind busy all the time" (Fran); "After all that hard work the day was done" (Mary).
- 2) **Social stigma and personal embarrassment:** being a "dummy", "ashamed", "unschooled" and not being able to "pronounce" or "write properly".
- 3) **Fear of being unable to learn** - they "couldn't", "didn't know how", or were "dumb". This relates to social stigma.
- 4) **Fear and misperceptions of the college** (where adult basic education upgrading is offered): "Old like her goin' to school" (Mary). "You'd have to go everyday day, where I can't grasp it as fast as that" (Fran);⁵⁷ and
- 5) **Dependence on husbands to mediate bureaucratic or other public literacy tasks of the household:** "My husband did all the banking, paid the bills..." (Mary). "I just depended on him for everything" (Fran).

All of the reasons Fran and Mary cite are typical of adult literacy students of any age (Fingeret, 1983a; Jacobs, 1987; Lothian, 1993; McGivney, 1990; Quigley, 1993; Thomas, 1990).⁵⁸ Thomas (1990) did a comprehensive summary of research on deterrents to adult basic education and found the following (p. 6-7):⁵⁹

⁵⁷ All Adult Basic Education (ABE) in Alberta is offered through the college system. Medicine Hat College has been offering ABE since the early 1980s. Prior to that time, it is questionable whether a program was available for adults. Fran's husband died in 1979.

⁵⁸ Dependence upon social networks may not be exclusively tied to one's spouse for other adults.

⁵⁹ Thomas (1990, pp. 4-7) provides many more examples within the categories than are provided here.

- **Financial Reasons** (costs of supplies, books, transportation, daycare)
- **Personal and Cultural Constraints** (work and time factors; children at home; opposition of husband to wife enrolling)
- **Special Needs** (conditions such as physical, psychological and learning disabilities)
- **Anxiety and Embarrassment** (low self esteem; fear of returning to school; fear of failure; fear of low skill being discovered and labelled)
- **Past School Experiences** (previous negative educational experiences; misconceptions about ABE programs; expectation of large classes)
- **Low Perceived Need and Distractions** (do not perceive the problem as such; easier to compensate for low literacy skills than to correct them; other influences compete more successfully for time)
- **Institutional Constraints** (institutional intimidation of the place, the people and the bureaucracy; scheduling not conducive to attendance)
- **Instructional Strategies** (difficulty working in a group)
- **Lack of Support Systems** (transportation; daycare; counselling and referral services)
- **Structural** (lack of programs because of geographic isolation; lack of appropriate programs).

Clearly, Fran and Mary are not unlike other (potential) adult literacy students. Summarizing the deterrents to program participation, however, does not illuminate *how* these factors worked to dissuade them from entering into formal adult education. The discussion now contextualizes their childhood experiences of school and the traditional gendered roles into which each was socialized.

Childhood Experiences of School

Reading is a social process. Its acquisition and its ongoing practice are entrenched in social contexts that influence the nature of interactions surrounding a text. How one engages with a text reflects "culturally appropriate ways of thinking, problem solving, valuing and feeling" (Bloome, 1985, p. 134). The culturally appropriate ways

of school may differ from the culturally appropriate ways assumed at home and within one's community. "The gaps between the domains [may] have serious consequences" (Szwed, 1988, p. 307). For example, Heath (1982) found that children whose reading routines emphasize meaning and talking about meaning both within and outside the text are being socialized into the language and literacy practices that most closely resemble those of school. Fran and Mary did not know the assumed reading discourses of school. They did not know how to engage with reading at all. They were the German-speaking daughters of homesteaders who spoke no English, let alone read and write it. Chalmers (1967), in his work on the history of education in the Prairies characterizes homesteaders and their lives this way:

And they came from central Europe, the men in sheepskin coats, the women in babushkas; from Ruthenia and other places that haven't been on Europe's map for two wars and half a hundred years. They came without English, without money, without resources other than their physical strength and their vast determination to make a new home in a new land...But wherever they came from, they were nonconformists. They had to be, to brave the unknown, the cold, the distances, the isolation, the separation from friends, family, the discomfort, hardship [and] even the unremitting hard work and drudgery. (Chalmers, 1967, p. 25)

While these homesteaders may have been brave, individualistic or desperate enough to take the chances they did, once here, they needed one another for support:

Although immigration took place in several waves during this period, scant attention was paid to language or literacy levels of those entering the country and virtually no training was available for new Canadians. Cultural groups formed close-knit, 'ghettoized' communities and supported each other, usually in their own language. Often illiterate in their mother tongue, many never learned to speak English or French, let alone read. (One Voice, 1991, p.11)

Fran's and Mary's days were filled within a community context which valued and authorized hard work and traditional gendered roles, but not schooling for females. "The old folks, in those days figured boys needed schooling but the girls don't" (Mary).⁶⁰ As

⁶⁰ Many of Fran and Mary's sentences are contextualized with phrases akin to "In those days. . .". It connotes an understanding that circumstances of the time conditioned what was possible.

girls whose mothers were sick (Mary) or dead (Fran). Mary and Fran worked as the cleaners of the home and the caretakers of the family. They learned the skills they would need for marriage and motherhood. As Chalmers points out, just sending girls to school in this era was a relatively new undertaking:

The mere presence of girls in the schools during Alberta's first decade is eloquent of certain ideas we have by now long accepted. Then they were still of very doubtful validity in many parts of the world, and especially so in pioneer lands. These ideas were that it was worthwhile giving a girl an education, that her brain or mind or distaff nature was such that she could master the same kind of education that suited a boy [and] that girls and boys could learn and could be trusted in each other's company. (Chalmers, 1967, p. 36)

Before learning how to read and write English, Fran and Mary had to learn how to speak English, "that come first" (Mary). However, their native language was either explicitly discouraged in school, (as in Mary's case, where, if she were caught speaking German "from the mean teacher", she "got the stick on [her] head"), or it was ignored. The following quote from Fran is worth reiterating in full, for it speaks to how school left her feeling isolated from its practices:

F: *There was only one teacher, and, you know, if you miss so much work, you need more attention...By the time you look something up in a dictionary, they were on to something else. And I was so shy to ask for help. I'd sit in the back row...[The class had students] from grade one to grade ten. [The teachers] didn't know I was missing so much.*

Mary and Fran were silenced and disempowered in the classroom through fear and embarrassment. As Thomas (1990) and Fingeret and Danin (1991) indicate, many younger adult literacy learners have had similar experiences as children:

These adults felt a deep sense of powerlessness as children to get the system to respond to their needs. While some sat docilely in the back of the room, others acted out, refusing to take the roles the school was defining for them. (Fingeret & Danin, 1991, p. 8)

The women in this study experienced school and the learning at school as something being done to them. They came to associate these alienating experiences with the dominant English language culture in general, and literacy-mediated institutions in particular. This association was further entrenched by the fact that neither really learned how to read or write well. When Heath (1986) discussed how employers want employees who can talk as though they read and write. She notes how the process of reading and writing instruction emphasized written practice to re-produce standard language norms (Heath, 1986, p. 285). She continues to explain how the standard language norms, at lower levels, “were isolable mechanical features of the language (e.g. spelling, subject-verb agreement, vocabulary development, etc.) and at the higher levels relied on predictable responses to literature” (Heath, 1986, p. 285).

As widowed older women in a literacy program Mary and Fran thought that reading was decoding, and writing was spelling and penmanship.⁶¹ Either they had left school before they got to the higher levels (Mary), or they had witnessed the higher levels without mastering them (Fran).⁶² They left school before they could have absorbed the written conventions of language that came to influence what it meant to speak “properly” or in a “schooled” manner:

Literate behaviors have implicitly influenced the oral language performance of those who silently succeeded in learning to read literature, write succinct summaries of content, and paraphrase correctly the views of secondary authorities on literary texts. (Heath, 1986, p. 286)

Furthermore, as the conveyor of dominant social values, school readers in the first third of this century moved from romantic Alexandra readers (that were clearly distant from the Canadian reality) to depicting middle class socio-cultural values:

⁶¹Fagan (1988) and Norman & Malicky (1986) have found similar perceptions among younger adults in literacy programs.

⁶²With multi-level classes, Fran and Mary may well have observed the older children engaging in appropriate behaviours with texts.

...adults and children who are always prosperous, happy, congenial [and] clean well-clothed, Anglo-Saxon urbanites. In short, they faithfully reflect the folkways and mores, the manners, customs and biases of North American middle class society. What have such readers to say to a brown-skinned Métis in northern Alberta, or to a Negro in a city slum? (Chalmers, 1967, p. 78)

And what had they to say to the women of this study or to other children of immigrant farming families who just wanted to survive in a new land? In this case, the "gaps between the two domains" did have serious consequences (Szwed, 1988, p. 307).

The women of this study witnessed literacy learning and literacy use in school, but never actively participated in its creation. They observed, but did not become engaged with the normative behaviours revolving around these processes in this context. In the process they were positioned outside of these behaviours, values and practices involving print. In Horsman's (1990) words, they were "dumbed down". Mary's and Fran's language, culture and ways of talking were not valued at school. Similarly, the language, culture and way of talking at school were not valued in their homes and communities.

Girls, Wives and Mothers

In Mary's and Fran's experiences as girls socialized into traditional roles for women, there was no disjuncture between the homesteader community context and broader societal discourses. From every quarter in each woman's life, she knew she would marry: "Women got married -- that was the choice." (Fran). These threads in their lives -- alienation from dominant practices of print and socialized dependencies (as part of a traditional patriarchic discourse for woman's role) -- worked to lay foundations of personal inadequacy and habits of dependency that would come to characterize their self-identities well into older adulthood, and beyond literacy instruction.

Drawing upon Eichler's (1973) distinction, Fran and Mary can be seen as having lived as *personal dependents* under the authority of their fathers within a patriarchic

family structure that was endorsed by law and government.⁶³ A personal dependent is “economically, socially, and/or legally tied to another person who has authority over him or her” (Eichler, 1973, p. 47).

When in conversation, both Mary and Fran often juxtaposed comments about limited years of schooling and intermittent school attendance alongside reflections about the fathers’ influence on their lives. Fran’s father would not “adopt her out” after Fran’s mother died and she wonders to this day whether she “might have got an education” if he had. Mary’s “strict” father (who wanted a son) seemed “to hold it all against” her and made her work particularly hard. Mary and Fran felt a powerlessness inside their homes. Whereas Fran “didn’t have it normal” Mary just felt that she “wasn’t around.” They felt alone and often silenced within their homes. They felt this way as they cleaned, tended to their siblings and learned to “cook, crochet and sew” (Mary).

The domestic skills the women learned at home prepared them well for the roles they were expected to assume in adulthood: “You knew when you got married that the wife stayed home, looked after the kids and cooked and washed and cleaned” (Fran). Luxton (1980) notes how traditional roles were all that were available for three generations of women living within socio-economic contexts that limited the wage-earning potential of women:

For many working-class women, supporting themselves independently by wage labour is not an inevitable or even realistic alternative. The sex segregation of the labour market restricts women to the lowest paid, least secure and most monotonous jobs. Women’s wages are so low that it is virtually impossible, especially if they have children, for women to survive. Often...there are simply not enough jobs available for those women who want to work. For these women marriage becomes a primary option - it appears to be the only viable life strategy available to them. (Luxton, 1980, p. 44-45)

For Fran and Mary, it was not only that the economic situation would ensure that they married, but more; neither conceived that *any* other life course was possible. They went

⁶³Eichler elaborates on various kinds of personal dependencies and how the nature of each relationship is conditioned by a variety of factors, including the dependent’s ability to “free” him or herself from the “master”.

almost directly from being personal dependents in childhood to being personal dependents in marriage:⁶⁴ "I just depended on him for everything" (Fran); or, "My husband did...everything (Mary):

Like members of minority groups, personal dependents are likely to have negative *self-image*, due to the fact that they constantly associate with somebody who has authority over them. Since it is not only the objective quality of a thought or idea that is reacted to but also the social position of the person who has expressed this thought or idea, personal dependents are more likely than masters to experience put-downs. This is likely to lead to a feeling of impotence and self-doubt on the part of the personal dependent. That many women do indeed suffer from just these mental handicaps has been repeatedly documented. (Eichler, 1973, p. 48)

Mary and Fran absorbed a negative self-image when children. In school, this was compounded by experiences that made them feel either unworthy of an education or incapable of it. Later, as wives dependent on their husbands for economic sustenance, their deeply rooted negative self-image was not eradicated. However, they now had some structures within their lives from which each could potentially gain some self-satisfaction. These structures were framed in the private sphere of their "labours of love" (Luxton, 1980):

Because the house is the living space for the housewife and her family, the services provided by her labour directly affect the well-being of household members. Housework, the most tangible daily "product" of her labour, provides evidence of both her skill as a worker and her affection for her family. A clean house and well-cooked meal become expressions of her worth and caring. (Luxton, 1980, p. 117)

The traditional gendered roles within which each relationship was embedded and into which each relationship inscribed itself helped ensure that neither Mary nor Fran could exercise her right to make autonomous decisions involving literate activities. When Mary sought her husband's approval (if not support) to improve her literacy skills, "He'd say, 'What am I here for? I'll do it.' " Her fear of the college despite wanting to

⁶⁴Mary worked in the early years of marriage and again later when her child was in school. Both husband and wife worked because they needed both incomes; however, Mary's cleaning job at the hospital seemingly did not lessen her dependency on her husband.

improve her skills became layered with guilt for considering that she might not want to depend upon her husband for "everything". Fran believes that her husband would have "let [her] go back after the kids got older." He died when she was 51 and her children were adults.⁶⁵

Mary and Fran loved their husbands very much and believe that their husbands meant well. They wanted to do what was right. In this case, that resulted in maintaining an imbalanced power structure of dependencies within each relationship:

While some aspects of marriage are good and women often mention the pleasure and happiness they derive from their marriages, the underlying imperatives create all sorts of tensions which diminish the marital relationship, binding people to each other not by choice based on love but by dependency and lack of alternatives. (Luxton, 1980, p. 43).

Each husband was each woman's primary source of self-esteem. Through a discourse of love, support and what is best for the children, Fran and Mary were not encouraged to improve their literacy skills.⁶⁶ Moreover, Mary and Fran may have weighed their options and felt that by not challenging their husbands' authority, they were not risking their primary source of power as well:

For women who have not had paid employment, family relationships are often the sole source of financial and emotional security, a situation that at least historically has been supported by law. Caring for the family is an important source of fulfillment for many women and is sometimes their only way of exercising power. (Ford & Sinclair, 1987, pp. 150-1)

In light of these roles and the stakes in jeopardizing their balance, it is not surprising that neither Mary nor Fran went back to school as a married adult. Their needs were minimized and relegated to interests, desires, or dreams: "I always wondered if I

⁶⁵Rockhill (1987) notes that for some Hispanic women, going to classes and learning English was acceptable for their husbands until such time as going to classes became going to 'school'. School took on a symbolic significance as the power of education. The literacy program in Medicine Hat was in a college and it is not impossible, in Mary's case, that this public setting threatened her husband's authority over her. Mary, especially, talked of her husband with love and respect at the same time she admitted to acquiescing to his veto.

⁶⁶See also Horsman (1990).

could've got the education....What if?" Fran redirected her dreams for herself onto her children. "Get your education. That's all I drilled into their heads. Go to school and get your education."⁶⁷ She also used her children's homework to help her with her "math", and later, would read (meaning decode) to her grandchildren. Fran used what resources she could within the contexts of her possibilities as a married mother, dependent on her husband's income and approval.

The two women of this study were socialized into roles of dependency – roles of family responsibility, women's work and women's caring. They accepted in their actions, if not in their dreams, this dominating message. It was one endorsed by their families and communities throughout their lives. Historically it was endorsed by law and government. The pattern of dependency that had been internalized and habituated thereby continued, not surprisingly, beyond their husbands' deaths.

Converging with the sense of inadequacy that arose through imbalanced power structures within their social networks, was a sense of inadequacy instilled by not being "educated" - not knowing how to read and write well. All these forces worked in concert: From within their minds, these fears of failure, of getting it wrong, of not speaking properly, of looking like a "dummy" when in the public realm of institutions and bureaucracies, held them back, kept them silent and helped render them self perceived non-readers. From outside their minds (or in relation to them), imbalanced power structures ensured ongoing dependencies. Prolonged fears and prolonged non use caused further entrenchment of their alienation from public practices of print. These forces further caused each woman to fully believe that she "couldn't" do it, that she just "didn't know enough of that" (Fran).

Mary's and Fran's husbands were their social network for literate help. In spite of the love and affection each had for him, the women were done a disservice. They could

⁶⁷ Horsman's (1990) study of rural Nova Scotian women in a literacy program notes that many younger and middle-aged mothers also transposed personal dreams for an education and better life onto their children. See also Quigley (1993).

not read well when their husbands lived and they could not read well after their husbands died. They did not fully realize the extent of their dependencies and the disservice it rendered them until they were widowed and "really, really stuck with it" (Mary). They then turned to their children, effectively accommodating the change into their existing social network for literate help.

ii. Why did they join the Senior's Literacy Program *now*?

Mary and Fran joined the Senior's Literacy Program *now* as older widowed women because:

- i. of a desire for independence from circumstances causing feelings of powerlessness
- ii. an appropriate program was available for them to join and a trusted person mediated the process

The second reason will be addressed briefly after the first.

i. Desire for Independence:

Many women reach pensionable age having spent their lives financially and emotionally dependent upon others, and it is precisely in their later years that they have to face and respond to enormous changes, perhaps bigger than any they have ever confronted before. (Ford & Sinclair, 1987, p. 151)

Older adulthood is accompanied by dealings with officialdom that are largely unique to that age. Retirement, death and health documents are among the kinds of "paper work" a senior must often navigate. A newly-retired Canadian may need to make decisions such as applying for Old Age Security Benefits and the Guaranteed Annual Supplement. Pension Plan Benefits, RRSPs and tax-related decisions have implications that should be clearly understood (Ross, 1991). By far the most traumatic change, however, is the death of a spouse. At age 65 only half of Canadian women are married and the percentages decline with advancing years (Stone, 1991). For the half of women

no longer married, most are widowed and this may mean time spent nursing the dying partner:

This means that they are not only deprived of their life's companion, but more often than not (given common causes of death today), they had nursed the spouse through his last days, with great stress and distress. Living alone after this trauma can prove challenging for both the widow and other family members. (Stone, 1991, p. 116)

Mary nursed her husband until his death. Three years afterwards, she was beginning to cope with living alone: "I miss him as much today as the day he left me". Upon his death, she and her daughter "did the banking and city taxes, utility and phone bills and all the different things afterwards that would happen".

Older adults, especially women, are likely to be multiple prescription drug users (Bergob, 1994). And, the older she gets, the more apt she is to use prescription drugs. About 15% of women aged 65 to 69 use three or more prescription drugs, compared with 20% of the 70 to 74 age group. Literacy as a health issue has been documented for adults of any age (e.g. Rootman, 1991). For the older adult, particularly if burdened by more than one ailment, health issues can be serious. Mary developed her own system for taking her twelve different prescription medications for nearly half a dozen ailments. She relied on oral instructions from professionals. She knew what the drugs were for and when to take them. Nevertheless, her perpetual sense that others know better than she, her emotional vulnerability from living alone, and life experiences that taught her "to satisfy" or please others, led to a bad decision based on bad advice: Mary reduced her medication without her doctor's consent and nearly landed in the hospital. "All I had to do was go one more day or two and I'd have been in the hospital" she stated.

About 40% of senior women who report needing help and getting help also report high levels of subjective well-being. The most highly satisfied group of seniors are those who do not need help (50%). Being independent is clearly important for most older adults and generally the more they can do on their own, the more content they are Ford

and Sinclair (1987) interviewed 14 older women with the purpose of “uncovering” their lives and gaining a more “complete account of their thoughts, feelings and activities” (p. 5). Among their many interesting findings is this:

The goals of the old women we interviewed [are] to strike a balance between the need for security and the need for independence and self respect; to ensure that a life of ‘non-work’ is made meaningful and leisure is both valued and seen as legitimate. Achieving these goals is difficult in itself, and further complicated by having to challenge the ageism in society, [those] attitudes that see you as ‘old’ before you feel you are old. (Ford & Sinclair, 1987, p. 151)

For both women of this study, the need to balance security needs with independence and self respect is paramount. Indeed, when Mary entered the Senior’s Literacy Program she wanted to do “more things by herself. Fran wanted “to look after [her] own.” For her, being independent meant having greater financial security; that is, more understanding and more control of the uses to which she would put her money. Wise shopping was as much a part of this as understanding her mail. Fran could already read personal letters. Writing cards and notes did not inspire her participation. She was generally healthy and independent in other areas of her life and had come to enjoy bowling, going on excursions with other seniors (though these, as we saw, also caused her stress) and being active in her church. Indeed, she had already been living alone for a dozen years. Despite these activities and the strong emotional support she had from her family, limited literacy skills undermined many aspects of her emotional, social and financial security.

After Mary’s husband died, “mail would come in and [she] didn’t know what in the world” she was reading. When she asked for help, a relative said, “Can’t you even read your own mail? -- so [Mary] never asked no more.” Mary was ten years Fran’s senior. She was less healthy, less mobile, less financially well-off and less literate. Unlike Fran, she had never written nor read cards or letters. Her husband had done all the printed tasks of the household. For Mary, doing more on her own meant reading and

writing better, understanding her mail without help and writing her own cheques. It came to also mean expressing herself through writing.

Mary repeatedly felt powerless within her social network. Particularly difficult for her was her daughter's indifference. Mary wanted the emotional and financial security of knowing she could rely upon her daughter for help with cheques or other literacy needs, but, "Sometimes it took a long time [for her daughter] to decide to...visit". She disliked the conditions under which she could get literate help. At the widow's support group she gratefully accepted the confidential help that was without emotional obligation. It was part of the grief counsellor's job (or a kind extension it) to help widowed women cope with change.

Conversely, Fran had literacy support from her family whenever she needed it. She felt secure in her arrangements with her son-in-law, who mediated more complex banking needs, and her "daughter or someone else" who mediated more routine needs. Fran would just "sign her name." This sense of security, (or stated differently, her habits of literate dependence and fears of institutions), enabled her to live twelve years after her husband's death without learning how to do it herself. In effect, her supportive social network enabled Fran *not* to act on her literacy needs. Even when they encouraged her to go to college, she "couldn't", for "who would want to teach a dummy like" her. Significantly, this same network stood behind her when she chose to improve her literacy skills.

It is often the case that adults enter into literacy programs when they have a crisis in their lives or are undergoing transitions within their life-span (See, for example, Cranton, 1989). They do not or can not get a particular job, their child is reading better than they; they mis-read packaging or labels; or, their marriage or relationship is dissolved due to separation, divorce or widowhood. McCaffery (1985) notes that for women, it is often the transition points that revolve around interpersonal relationships that precede Adult Basic Education (ABE) participation:

A change in family circumstances, divorce, widowhood or pregnancy means dealing with officialdom and bureaucracy. The fear of this, compounded by anxiety over lack of basic skills, creates the pressure to seek help. Many women, like men, view themselves as unable to learn and it is only when society brings sufficient pressure to bear that it becomes impossible to retreat and ignore the problem. (McCaffery, 1985, p. 65)

For Fran and Mary, widowhood was among the circumstances of their lives that contributed to their decision to join the literacy program, but it alone did not cause it. Life-long habits of dependency and personal fears outweighed desires for change until such time as their threatened sense of security met with a real possibility for change. Society brought sufficient pressure to bear upon Fran when she bounced a cheque, not when she became widowed. It is unknown how long Mary may have remained dependent on the grief counsellor and her daughter. Throughout all of my conversations with Mary, her daughter's indifference was distressing to her. Even after literacy learning began in the program, her daughter maintained (and Mary allowed) significant emotional authority over Mary. Had an appropriate opportunity for learning not been there, the outlook for Mary's life might have been quite bleak. Unlike Fran, no single crisis propelled Mary's decision to join; rather, it was the gradual layering of many incidents that caused her to feel incompetent in her own affairs -- a layering that was leading to a emotional crisis.

In general, each woman wanted support, encouragement and security from her family. Neither wanted to be dependent upon it. For Fran and Mary, regardless of the nature of their literate help, the Senior's Literacy Program held out hope for greater independence. We briefly turn now to the other two reasons why Fran and Mary joined the seniors literacy program when they did.

ii. An appropriate program was available and a trusted person mediated the process

Quigley (1993), in a study of potential adult literacy students who could have attended an Adult Basic Education (ABE) program but chose not to do so, identifies three kinds of “resistance” to ABE: personal/emotive, age-related and ideological/cultural resisters. Personal/emotive resisters recollect school as being a place that showed “lack of consideration, attention and empathy...Overall this group firmly believed they had been ignored in the classroom...Others were hurt and deeply offended by teachers” (Quigley, 1993, p. 85). Fran and Mary might aptly be categorized as personal/emotive resisters to ABE. Quigley goes on to argue that, for a literacy program to successfully recruit individuals for whom school was so personally alienating, “only a major breakthrough in trust held any hope for return” (p. 85). Interestingly, however, Fran and Mary do not correspond as well as one might expect with the age-related resisters. For this group, “*education* is important at an abstract level; *learning* is necessary for continued growth; *school* is for the next generation ” (p. 87). Fran and Mary emerge as generally typical of adult literacy students of any age, but atypical of older less literate adults, in particular. Quigley (1993) notes that for age-related resisters to enter into ABE, program providers must clearly establish how the program can help the adult in concrete, practical ways in the course of daily living.

When Fran bounced the cheque, and societal forces came to bear, she “went down to the college with her granddaughter” and there met the coordinator whom she liked immediately. The grief counsellor at the widow’s support group mediated between Mary and the coordinator. Mary liked the coordinator upon their first meeting. Mary and Fran also liked their tutors, and came to trust them rather quickly: “I feel she understands what I’ve gone through” (Fran) said. “I can talk to her closer than my sister” said Mary.

Part of this trust bore directly from the fact that the coordinator and tutors were older women themselves, and that instruction was one-on-one and private. These same

factors worked to reduce fears of print in general and improve literacy skills in particular. They are also among the factors that need to be considered when tutoring adults whose life-span habits revolve around dependencies.⁶⁸

iii. What were the impacts of the program?

Mary had a personally distressing social network and Fran had a personally supportive one, yet each wanted to do more on her own. And, within six months both women in this study were writing and reading prose. Fran had mastered basic arithmetic and was writing her own cheques. Mary had begun writing her cheques and going to the bank and the library. Fran ventured into a bank within the next six months, while Mary wrote a letter to the government and had a story published in an adult new readers' newspaper. Understanding their learning gains entails recognizing the affective factors of reduced fear and anxiety already noted. Also, each woman had learned in school. Each could learn within the program and each could use what they learned both inside and outside the program. A reduction in their life-long sense of self-doubt and inadequacy converged continually with their growing literate knowledge.

This is a striking change. As school children, Mary and Fran had incorporated a negative self-image and fear which continued through habits of dependency to keep them outside of dominant discourses of the printed world. The longer they remained outside of these public practices, the more they feared them. The more they feared them, the more they wanted to remain outside of them.

We look now not so much at the process of changed self-concept, for clearly that has been positively affected by the Literacy Program, but rather, at how this changed self-concept merged with improvements in reading and writing from learner-centred

⁶⁸Jones (1991) found that adults who perceive their literacy skills as inadequate would prefer a tutor rather than a teacher. Schools and colleges tend to be preferred by those with higher skill levels who want to go on to further training. Fran's prose skills were quite solid, but it seems that it is her *perception* of her skills as inadequate that is crucial.

instruction that enabled entrance into some public practices of print. I will work through the example of Fran rehearsing a bank scene for the televised program in which the Senior's Literacy Program was featured, and make reference to a few other examples in order to show how engagement in public practices had personal implications for Fran and Mary within their social networks of literate help.⁶⁹

From Private to Public

Private and public practices have to do with the extent to which skills must be applied to a task in ways that are socially defined and normatively judged. For example, private practices are when students perform a task idiosyncratically, personally constructing a response that reflects their lives, personalities and skills; it is personalized and judgment about adequate performance resides more in the person than in the situation. Public practices can be understood to reflect social conventions, such as correctly writing checks or marking the answer sheets on standardized tests. (Fingeret & Danin, 1991, p. 14)

Fran and Mary wrote language experience stories - private texts written in the privacy of their homes. Mary read stories first in private and later in public, though the act of reading itself was a private one. Fran wrote cheques first at home and later in a department store - a public document learned in private and transferred to a public place along with the appropriate conventions. Fran and Mary both wanted to write their own cheques and they learned how to do so. Whereas language experience stories are "personal", cheques and other forms and documents are "impersonal" and "agentless" (Darville, 1989):

Functional literacy involves administrative and institutional texts, and practices of reading and writing them. These practices and texts connect people with extended forms of governments and business organizations. We might colloquially call functional literacy "paper work," and analytically call it "bureaucratic inscription and regulation." From a dominant perspective,

⁶⁹ Mary and Fran's successful acquisition of some literate acts is not unlike that of other adult learners' (cf. Fingeret & Danin, 1991). The principles of learner-centred adult literacy education that are espoused in most tutor training manuals (e.g. Cameron & Rabinowitz, 1988) were also used and have been described from the women's point of view in the preceding chapter. While some implications for learner-centredness can be drawn from their stories, of greater interest to this thesis is how success in both the private and public parts of learning affect everyday lives.

functional literacy is not reading and writing *per se*, but the bureaucratic literacy of "the public." It is people's ability to inscribe themselves in, and coordinate themselves according to, documents that are used in bureaucratic and organizational processes. (Darville, 1994, pp. 70-71)

Darville goes on to argue that public forms and documents can render the user "illiterate". To use these documents correctly we need to know the function they perform in relation to the background knowledge implied by the organizational relations of which they are a part. As a public discourse routine, writing a cheque (in a bank for example), comes complete with normative assumptions of how we inscribe and coordinate our skills and actions in context. Fran and Mary knew the function of cheques. Fran would sometimes (not confidently) try to write them on her own before she entered the senior's program. But she was unsure about "great big number-word[s] like one thousand one hundred and two" and she was unsure how to act and talk right while in a bank. It was not just the cheques *per se* that rendered these two women "illiterate" while in banks, but also their lack of experience with, and knowledge of, the public discourses and social practices embedded within its confines.

Cheques and many other routine banking forms, like those Fran wanted to understand, are "enabling forms":

Forms are a type of document structure that is unique in the sense that they require users to supply information...the functions/uses of forms fall along a continuum that ranges from personal to enabling to regulating. (Kirsch & Mosenthal, 1990, p. 640)

Personal forms may be simple lists for memory aid (shopping lists, for example). Enabling forms bridge personal and societal functions. They draw on the user's knowledge of prior information, information located on the form itself, or information derived from a secondary source (looking up one's bank account number). Regulating forms "verify, monitor and update information" (Kirsch & Mosenthal, 1990, p. 641) and require individuals to go to secondary sources to obtain the information and subsequently

present it to various agencies. Upon the death of a spouse, older adults are faced with many specific regulatory documents.⁷⁰ As life resumes a more stable course, enabling forms and personal forms take on a greater role, while regulatory forms become those that are commonly mediated by adults regardless of age.⁷¹

Forms and documents may pose problems even for those who can read and write well (S. Jones, 1991). Those at higher literacy levels, however, understand that it is the form that is not well designed that often poses difficulties. These individuals are also likely to have resources for getting help either with the form itself or for complying with its regulatory dimensions, and likely not embarrassed by seeking such help. Less literate adults like Fran, however, may not have these resources and instead believe that their lack of understanding of the form and its appropriate use reflects generally on an individual's competence. They consider themselves generally "dumb" or "illiterate" because of how they feel in those situations.

For all these reasons it was a brave step for Fran to agree to participate in the national television program that featured the Senior's Literacy Program. To prepare for her scene, Fran successfully calculated and completed a fictitious banking transaction the week before the video. The day before filming, Fran and her tutor practiced the skill in context - they went to the bank and did an actual deposit and withdrawal transaction. Fran got it "wrong". She did not know to whom the words "less cash received" were referring - herself or the bank. She did not understand the "agentless" organizational relations assumed by those particular words. Gee (1985) tells us that individuals need ample socialization into how to read a text appropriately:

One always and only learns to interpret texts of a certain type in certain ways through having access to and ample experience in social settings where texts of

⁷⁰In addition to coping with one of life's most stressful events, a surviving spouse must also obtain death certificates and present them to various agencies. Any properties, titles, insurances, or financial accounts must be transferred. The widow must be able to deal with the will, estates and lawyers.

⁷¹This may have implications for the pervasive debate of measuring seniors' literacy levels according to criteria skewed for the general adult population.

that type are read in those ways. One is socialized or enculturated into certain *social practices*. (Gee, 1985, p. 209)

Fran had some experiences with banks (writing cheques), although not "ample" ones. Using the skill within its social context revealed a gap in her knowledge. Her tutor explained the form and since then Fran has been doing all of her routine banking needs independently (though she continued to rely on her family for more complex matters). In our last visit together it had become a normal part of her life: "Oh yah, all that I do now." It was so normal, in fact, that one would be surprised to learn that she ever had any difficulties. For the most part, Fran now counted herself among the social group members who can do that "right". It did not take her a lifetime's apprenticeship to learn how. Nevertheless, in the recesses of her mind, the perception continues "still -- that [she's] uneducated [although she] feel[s] much better about it now". This feeling may continue to haunt her, but it no longer holds her back in the way it did: "I can't explain it. You do things [that] otherwise you wouldn't."

It does not seem coincidental that Mary's tutor went with her to the library and not to the bank. Mary learned how libraries work and will go and get books on her own. For banking needs, however, Mary tended to stay at home. Writing her own cheques meant she did not *have* to go to the bank. She could write them from her kitchen table "and get them out." In this way Mary could still avoid banks, but for very different reasons.

Fran's and Mary's increased ability to meet some of their banking needs or understand (for Mary) more of her mail meant that part of their concrete dependence upon family had been lifted. Fran could drive to the bank whenever needed. Mary no longer "had to wait on" her daughter or "none of the family" for help. She "can do a lot of it on [her] own, which [she] never used to" and she "feel[s] so good" about that. She could *choose* to write her cheques on her own or *choose not* to go to the bank. Reading

stories and writing notes, cards and letters, became a more constructive and self-fulfilling way to spend spare time. Mary would "sooner read" than do other hobbies.

Managing some of their personal finances enabled greater independence for each woman. This is what each had hoped when she joined the Senior's Literacy Program. We now look more closely at how this increased autonomy played itself out in relation to each woman's social network.

Social Networks and Independence

Mary

Mary's way of interacting with her social network began to change. It changed, in part, because the documents and social contexts that rendered her "illiterate" and "incompetent" in the eyes of many people, including herself, were mastered well enough that she could often get them right. This built up her confidence level. Change also occurred because Mary learned to express herself in writing through personal stories, notes, cards and letters. The audience extended from the program to family and friends and then to strangers. She almost always did her writing while at home, though she started to read outside of it. She came to take on the persona of a *reader*.

Expressing herself in writing led to expressing herself in conversation. She became less "scared" about whether she "might pronounce things wrong." Emotional pressures from her family during widowhood had once muffled her voice and left her crying in the night. She became more likely to turn her hurt into indignation and even anger. Mary has developed the sense that she has a *right* to express her opinion and do what is in her best interest. "I don't let them run all over me like I used to...I know what's best for myself."

Meeting her literacy needs (independently or with her tutor's help) enabled Mary to maintain her need for security while letting go of interpersonal (dependent) relations

that were inhibiting. Before entering the literacy program, Mary had no *choice* but to depend on persons who exacted an emotional cost. Dependency was all she knew. Her tutor's help was not conditional nor contingent upon obligation and relative positions of authority or dependence in the same way much of her inner social network had been. Yet Mary was never willing to change tutors or enter into small-group work. It seemed that she became somewhat dependent upon her tutor, laying things aside until her tutor came and checked them "just in case": "I wouldn't give up [my tutor] for anything in the world. She's one of my best friends." Mary's time with the program was coming to a close. She had achieved what she wanted -- to read and write better and do her own cheques. She was a more independent person who had discovered her inner voice and had begun to act upon it.

Fran

Fran's interests and goals had always remained tied to increasing her control of her financial security, although she would use her math skills when ever an opportunity presented itself such as when she began keeping score at bowling. Independence meant having a choice to do her routine banking, estimating costs and shopping with discount flyers. Like Mary, she shed many of her apprehensions. More than Mary's, Fran's goals opened further: "I'll go as far as I can to see how far I can go."

Being able to do these things was quite timely because Fran felt that she was "not learning as quickly" as she once did. Her early successes with arithmetic (like Mary's with reading and writing) are best explained by her discovery of prior-knowledge and then her working to fill in the gaps. With multiplication, Fran "just couldn't get 4×0 . [She] would always put 4 - and that's where [her] mistake was." Over the last year she was introduced to percentages, and metric. She assessed her ability with percentages as "pretty good", but with metric "it goes in here and comes out there. It just doesn't sink in." Fran began to extend knowledge that lay latent in her memory and as she did so her

rate of learning slowed. She felt that if she had a tutor more than one day a week, she might "catch on more." Learning to do her routine banking was timely because the people she relied upon for help became increasingly busy and less able to help: "There was always some help. Day or night...right away. Now everybody's gone."

Fran was willing to enter into small-group work provided it was not competitive, and she was willing to work with another tutor, of any age. Fran became 'dependent' on learning -- not on her tutor. She remained dependent on her family for more complex negotiations with the bank.

With literacy, the lifelong inertia that held Mary and Fran back and kept them out, was partly lifted as each woman found a voice -- if not a new voice then one she had never dared express. This had transpired along with a changed self-perception as a *reader*. Mary and Fran now look to the future:

M: *I've learned what I did. If I haven't got the chance to learn any more, I have really improved myself. Things look brighter.*

F: *They think that you're going in for something, like to learn for, what would you say - a teacher or lawyer or something, and you're not. You're going in to help yourself....It's to improve your own.*

iv. Literacy, Social Networks and Independence

It is perhaps the irony of qualitative research that the more one delves into the social worlds of individuals, the more one can see commonalties in human experience. This, after all, is what a social discourse enables. It is a means of looking into experience in ways that recognize and affirm individual uniqueness in relation to social context.

This thesis has been about the ways that limited literacy has been experienced by two older women who decided to improve their reading, writing and arithmetic skills, and how learning interacted with each individual and her social world. For the two

women of this study, and other adults like them, literacy learning laid the foundation of skills that enabled increases in confidence and independence. These precipitated the emergence of voices that had hitherto been ridiculed or silenced. Their voices silenced because experiences of home, school and community that engendered a sense of alienation and inadequacy. They lived under the shadow of these internalized beliefs about themselves, and did not have any real opportunities to prove otherwise until late in life.

Mary's and Fran's stories suggest that a social network that mediates literacy needs also perpetuates a feeling of powerlessness and inadequacy. This is true whether the social network is healthy and emotionally supportive or not (although the latter may be particularly difficult). When support networks die, move away or become too busy, the recipient of literate help may be left alone to manage in an unfamiliar world of bureaucratic print. Feelings of inadequacy that may have once been minimized under another's protective cloak surface at a time of life that is often marked by the most difficult changes to which individuals must adjust. In view of this, it is odd that Fingeret would suggest that literacy is on a par, say, with other instrumental skills and knowledge like cutting hair or repairing cars. It is worth quoting her fully:

Illiterate adults do not necessarily see themselves as dependent simply because they lack reading and writing skills. Many illiterate adults view reading and writing as only two of the many instrumental skills, knowledge resources that, combined, are required for daily life. Individuals create social networks that are characterized by reciprocal exchange; networks offer access to most of the resources individuals require, so that it is unnecessary to develop every skill personally. Therefore, many illiterate adults see themselves as interdependent: they contribute a range of skills and knowledge other than reading and writing to their networks. Some illiterate adults see themselves as having little or nothing to offer their networks. They are engaged in asymmetrical rather than reciprocal exchange relationships, and may be viewed as dependent. While their lack of literacy contributes to this condition, it is not the cause. (Fingeret, 1983a, pp. 133-4)

The two women of this study saw themselves as dependent although the implications of this dependency and its disservice to them were not realized until after

their husbands died. In retrospect, they clearly regretted not having had the opportunity to develop literacy skills personally. They regretted being so generally dependent on their husbands. The women's social world was the private world, and only Fran's letter writing and book-reading to her grandchildren fell within that realm. Public practices of print were a part of the husband's role. Fran and Mary were perpetually indebted to their partners who were the breadwinners. They had not had any real alternatives other than to depend upon their husbands to mediate the bureaucratic transactions of the household. As women, they were socialized into accepting traditional roles. Breaking ties of literate dependence situated within such constraints can be a formidable undertaking (c.f. Horsman, 1990; McCaffery, 1987; Rockhill, 1987).

The sense of inadequacy that haunted Fran and Mary haunts many potential and participating literacy students. Indeed, enhanced self esteem is often one of the key differences that students and teachers note when adults begin to learn. The informants in Fingeret's (1983a) study also feared being labelled "dumb" when outside of trusting persons within their network. Not being able to read and write at least to function in society has a negative effects on one's self image. Being in a dependent relationship has a negative effect on one's self image. These negative effects are, in part, a result of the normative messages conveying dominant societal discourses. They position people outside or inside, right or wrong. This is a qualitatively different discourse from that surrounding instrumental skills and knowledge:

One fact which is obvious with regard to adults at low levels of literacy development is that they are print deprived and literally not part of the literate culture around them. They seldom have clear notions regarding why people read and generally view reading as a decoding task. They are aware, however, that literacy is needed in order for them to be as good as other people. (Norman & Malicky, 1986, p. 13)

As we saw earlier, concepts of literacy are dichotomously conceived and ideologically laden as "power," "function," and "grace". For Fran, it was also

"education" or "schooling." For the women's husbands, it seems also to have been "threat" (c.f. Horsman, 1990; Rockhill, 1987) To be able to function in society, and to achieve one's goals and potential, was, for these women, to be independent of literate help. Entrance into these domains, even as older women, enhanced their self-worth and brightened their future prospects. In crossing into some discourses of print, in defining themselves as readers, Fran and Mary assumed those rights that others take for granted and each began to create and control more of her own social world. Their lives have been enriched.

Chapter 5

Older Adults and Literacy: Research and Practice

At the onset of the thesis it was noted that research on seniors and literacy has suffered from being “fragmented”, “contradictory” and “limited”. It has been argued that this state of affairs is the result of a general societal belief that older adults are less interesting or worthy of study than, say, working adults, single mothers, the learning disabled or other sub-group identified in adult literacy research. While there appears to be some truth in this, it would not account for the contradictions in the research. This state of affairs, it seems, is the outcome of researchers working primarily from one frame of reference at the expense of others.

The stories of these two women clearly show that a multiplicity of disciplines is needed. A life-span perspective influences how older adults perceive and live out their years and how literacy is constructed by and for them in that process. A socio-contextual framework is needed to understand the contexts in which they manage now, and how literacy (and literacy learning) may change those contexts. Part of this analysis must include a gendered perspective as well as present living arrangements. The senior who resides in an apartment for seniors and is largely excluded from the intergenerational community outside of it may experience literacy and literacy needs differently from those who, like the women in this study, live independently.

Program location becomes a critical issue in this regard. When trying to reach and teach seniors we may readily go into apartment complexes where they congregate and find many literacy learning needs, but within the security of that environment, not all seniors may necessarily perceive a *need*. And, if they do, they may not be willing to admit this need in front of their peers. The socio-polical context of the sites where seniors congregate is a critical consideration in a needs assessment (Lothian, 1996). It is

imperative that appropriate, learner-centred programs be available for elderly adults who seek some measure of independence from their social networks of literate help.

Statistical data have greatly enhanced our general understanding of the nature and implications of literacies at a societal level. Closer analysis of these trends in light of the older adults' goals, interests and literacy levels is warranted. Even a cursory glance at this work in comparison to what is known about less literate seniors' literacy levels in relation to demands placed upon them within their contexts and their learning goals suggests that when it comes to literacy, there is much more in common between older and younger adults than there are differences.

Among the commonalities is the need for a "major breakthrough in trust" (Quigley, 1993, p. 85) for some low level learners to embark on literacy learning. For these adults, one-on-one programs may be most viable. The one-on-one program model used by the Medicine Hat Senior's Literacy Program was clearly effective for the women in this study. This effectiveness related both directly to the learner-centred teaching methods used by tutors as well as to the friendship established between them. I will return to this point momentarily. Not all students in that program, however, experienced success in the ways that these women did and there was certainly some indication that unsupportive social networks may have contributed to their ability to participate in and persevere with the program. Some children or grandchildren seemed embarrassed by their parents' or grandparents' participation. In another case it was suggested that the senior's literate help felt threatened by a pending loss of control over the seniors' finances. In light of the stigma attached to illiteracy, the dependent situation of many seniors, and the potential for elder abuse, this is an open area for qualitative inquiry.

Unlike informants in most other studies, however, Mary and Fran did *not* indicate that they joined the program because of a need for a friend and confidante. Liking their tutor was a prerequisite to, and benefit of, program participation, but not its initial cause. These women joined to improve their literacy skills. Mary was willing to stay with the

program to maintain the friendship she built with her tutor and to get consistent non-judgmental help. Dependence and perhaps over dependence on either tutors or the socialization that arises out of instruction is an issue that seems to be avoided in discussions among literacy practitioners. Dirkx et al. (1993) make a strong case for practitioners to develop "boundary awareness" between them and their students. What kind of boundary awareness training might practitioners working with older adults who might get "hooked" on instruction (McGivney, 1990) need? How can we guard against ageist and pastoral attitudes that might encourage dependency while they belittle the senior? If greater independence is a goal of adult literacy instruction, then adult literacy practitioners working with the elderly may need to be both cognizant and cautious of the significant role they play within the seniors' social network. It would seem this issue is equally applicable to literacy students of any age.

Literate senior tutors need not be obliged to help out only in senior-specific programs such as that in Medicine Hat. Forging links between the senior communities and the literacy communities may enable the development of a senior sub-component to existing programs. Group work is often advocated for younger literacy students as well as older adults interested in education. Fran's experience suggests that her confidence level played a major role in her willingness to engage in group work. It might be that, here too, one-on-one programs can bridge entry into further educational programs for some older adults who may want to go further. Conversely, for those regulating documents that happen only once in a life time (for most), might drop-in centres work on an as-needed basis be considered? Factors influencing whether ages should be integrated or segregated still need to be examined more closely. Most sensible is that seniors embarking upon literacy learning have a choice.

Summary

This thesis, in part, has attempted to disentangle the "limited" and "contradictory" field of 'reading among the elderly " from "literacy for older adults", setting the latter within traditions of adult literacy theory which themselves are easily loaned out to women-centred studies, discourse theory frameworks, psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic perspectives. In so doing, we can see more clearly the places they rest on the spectrum of all adult literacy students and understand better where commonalities and differences may exist.

Through no fault of their own, Fran and Mary lived on the margins of literacy. The democratizing benefits of improved literacy are the restitution that society can offer all less literate seniors. These benefits may not be without their difficulties, as seniors struggle to free themselves from lifetimes of literate dependence on social networks. Appropriate and accessible literacy programs for seniors must be available in such a way that the kinds of self respect and independence that arise from becoming a part of the literate culture will not be denied.

References

- Askov, E., & Forlizzi, L. (1989). Assessing the educational needs and interests of students enrolled in a reading program at a centre for older adults. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University, University Park Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 316 832)
- Batsleer, J. T., Davies, R., O'Rourke, C., & Weedon, C. (1985). *Rewriting English: Cultural politics of gender and class*. London: Methuen.
- Bergob, M. (1994, Summer). Drug use among senior Canadians. *Canadian Social Trends*, 25-29.
- Bloome, D. (1985). Reading as a social process. *Language Arts*, 62 (2), 134-142.
- Bossart, P., Cottingham, B., & Gardner, L. (1994). Learning to learn: Impacts of the adult basic education experience on the lives of participants. Victoria: Province of British Columbia, Ministry of Skills, Training and Labour.
- Brockett, R. G. (1985). The relationship between self directed learning readiness and life-satisfaction among older adults. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 35 (4), 210-219.
- Burger, A., Hale, L., Joyce, M., & Loyie, L. (1992). *The wind cannot read*. British Columbia: Ministry of Advanced Education, Training and Technology.
- Cameron, J., & Rabinowitz, M. (1988). *A guide for tutoring adult literacy students*. British Columbia: Ministry of Advanced Education and Job Training.
- Canadian Press. (1996, November 11). Older minds as swift as young counterparts: Decision-making faster, but short-term memory worse among aged, tests find. *Globe and Mail*, pp. 1.
- Cervero, R. M. (1985). Is a common definition of adult literacy possible? *Adult Education Quarterly*, 36, 50-54.
- Chalmers, J. W. (1967). *Schools of the foothills province*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Charnley, A., & Jones, H. A. (1979). *The concept of success in adult literacy*. London: ALBSU.
- Community Literacy of Ontario (1995, July). Fact sheet and statistics on community based English language literacy programs in Ontario.
- Coupland, N., Coupland, J., & Giles, H. (1991). *Language, society & the elderly: Discourse, identity and ageing*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Coupland, N., Nussbaum, J.F., & Grossman, A. (1993). Discursively formulating the life span. In N. Coupland, & J. F. Nussbaum (Eds.), *Discourse and life span identity* (pp. 1-4). Newbury Park, CA.: Sage Publications.

- Courtenay, B. C., Stevenson, R. T., & Suharat, M. P. (1982). Functional literacy among the elderly: Where we are(n't). *Educational Gerontology*, 8, 339-352.
- Cranton, P. (1989). *Planning instruction for adult learners*. Toronto: Wall & Thompson.
- Darville, R. (1989). The language of experience and the literacy of power. In M.C. Taylor & J. A. Draper (Eds.), *Adult literacy perspectives* (pp. 25-40). Toronto: Culture Concepts Inc.
- Darville, R. (1994). Function and voice: Healing the breach in adult literacy. *Adult Basic Education*, 4 (2), 69-80.
- de Beauvoir, S. (1970). *La vieillesse*. Paris: Editions Gallimard.
- de Castell, S., Luke, A., & MacLennan, D. (1986). On defining literacy. In S. de Castell, A. Luke, & E. Kieran (Eds.), *Literacy, society and schooling: A reader* (pp. 3-14). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- de Castell, S., & Luke, A. (1988). Defining "Literacy" in North American schools: Social and historical conditions and consequences. In E.R. Kingten, B.M. Kroll & M. Rose (Eds.), *Perspectives on literacy* (pp. 159-174). Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- de Santi, R.J. (1979). Cue system utilization among older readers. *Educational Gerontology*, 4, 271-277.
- Dirks, J.M., Fonfara, T., & Flaska, K. (1993). Self and not-self in the practitioner-learner relationship: The problem of boundary awareness in ABE practice. *Adult Basic Education*, 3 (1), 51-68.
- Eichler, M. (1973). Women as personal dependents. In M. Stephenson (Ed.), *Women in Canada* (pp. 36-55). Toronto: new press.
- Fagan, W.T. (1988). Concepts of reading and writing among low literate adults. *Reading Research and Instruction*, 27 (4), 47-60.
- Fingeret, A. (1983a). Social network: A new perspective on independence and illiterate adults. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 3 (3), 133-146.
- Fingeret, A. (1983b). Oral Sub-culture membership: A non-deficit approach to illiterate adults. In G. C Whaples & W. M. Rivers (Eds.), *Life-long learning research conference proceedings* (pp. 155-159). (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 226 228)
- Fingeret, H.A., & Danin, S.T. (1991). *They really put a hurtin' on my brain: Learning in Literacy Volunteers of New York City. Executive summary*. Durham, N.C.: Literacy South.
- Fisher, J. C. (1987). The literacy level among older adults. Is it a problem? *Adult Literacy and Basic Education*, 11, 41-50.

- Fisher, J. C. (1988). Older adults readers and nonreaders. *Educational Gerontology*, 14, 57-66.
- Fisher, J. C. (1989). Literacy among noninstitutionalized older adults. Paper presented at midwest research-to-practice conference in adult, continuing and community education (pp. 66-71). Missouri: (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 330 781)
- Fisher, J. C. (1990). The function of literacy in a nursing home context. *Educational Gerontology*, 16, 105-116.
- Ford, J., & Sinclair, R. (1987). *Sixty years on: Women talk about old age*. London: The Women's Press Limited.
- Freer, K.J. (1994). How the rural elderly view literacy in their lives. *Educational Gerontology*, 20, 157-169.
- Gee, J.P. (1985). The narrativations of experience in the oral style. *Journal of Education*, 167 (1), 9-34.
- Gee, J.P. (1990). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses*. London: Falmer Press.
- Gentile, L.M., & McMillan, M. (1979). Reading: A means of renewal for the aged. *Educational Gerontology*, 4, 215-222.
- Gillespie, M. (1993). Profiles of adult learners: Revealing the multiple faces of literacy. *TESOL Quarterly*, 27 (2), 529-533.
- Giroux, H.A. (1988). Literacy and the pedagogy of voice and political empowerment. *Educational Theory*, 38 (1), 61-75.
- Glesne, C., & Peshkin, A. (1992). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction*. New York: Longman.
- Gonda, J. (1980). The relationship between formal education and cognitive functioning: A historical perspective. *Educational Gerontology*, 5, 288-291.
- Graff, H.J. (1986). The legacies of literacy: Continuities and contradictions in western society and culture. In S. de Castell, A. Luke, & E. Kieran (Eds.), *Literacy, society and schooling: A reader* (pp. 61-86). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Grannick, S., & Friedman, A.S. (1973). The effect of education on the decline of psychometric test performance with age. *Journal of Gerontology*, 22, 269-274.
- Gray, W.S. (1956). *The teaching of reading and writing*. Chicago: Scott, Foresman & Company.
- Haase, A.B., Robinson, R. D., & Beach, R. (1979). Teaching the aged reader: Issues and strategies. *Educational Gerontology*, 4, 229-237.

- Harvey, R., L., & Dutton, D. (1979). Reading interests of older adults. *Educational Gerontology*, 4, 209-214.
- Havighurst, R.J. (1976). Education through the adult life span. *Educational Gerontology*, 1, 41-52.
- Heath, S. B. (1982). What no bedtime story means: Narrative skills at home and at school. *Language in Society*, 11, 49-76.
- Heath, S. B. (1986). Literacy and language change. In D. Tannen, & J. E. Alatis (Eds.), *Languages and linguistics: The interdependence of theory, data, and application* (pp. 282-293). Georgetown University roundtable on languages and linguistics. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Heath, S. B. (1988). Protean shapes in literacy events: Ever-shifting oral and literate traditions. In E.R. Kingten, B.M. Kroll & M. Rose (Eds.), *Perspectives on literacy* (pp. 91-117). Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Heisel, M. A. (1980). Adult education and the disadvantaged older adult: An analytical review of the research literature. *Educational Gerontology*, 5, 125-137.
- Heisel, M. A. (1985). Assessment of learning activity level in a group of black aged. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 36 (1), 1-14.
- Heisel, M.A., & Larson, G. (1984). Literacy and social milieu: Rating behaviour of the black elderly. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 34 (2), 63-70.
- Hiemstra, R. P. (1972). Continuing education for the aged: A survey of needs and interests of older people. *Educational Gerontology*, 22 (2), 100-109.
- Hiemstra, R. P. (1976). Older adult learning: Instrumental and expressive categories. *Educational Gerontology*, 1, 227-236.
- Hiemstra, R. P. (1982). The elderly learner: A naturalistic inquiry. *Proceedings of the annual adult education research conference* (pp. 111-116). (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 217 139)
- Horsman, J. (1990). *Something in my mind besides the everyday: Women and literacy*. Toronto: Toronto Women's Press.
- Jacobs, B. (1987). Combating Illiteracy among the elderly: A cost effective strategy. Final Project Report. Washington, DC.: National Council on the Aging, Inc. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 307 757)
- Jacobs, B. (1990) Project LEEP. In *Resourceful aging today and tomorrow conference proceedings* (pp. 71-72). Washington, D.C.: American Association of Retired Persons. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 344 041)
- Jones, D. (1987). *Empire of dust*. Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press.
- Jones, E. E. (1979). Adult education and the older adult. *Educational Gerontology*, 4, 349-354.

- Jones, S. (1990). *Proposal for the evaluation of One Voice seniors' literacy project*. Ottawa: Centre for the Study of Adult Literacy, Carleton University.
- Jones, S. (1991). Literacy programming and the survey of literacy skills used in daily activities. In Statistics Canada (1991a), *Adult literacy in Canada: Results of a national study* (pp. 95-101). Ottawa: Ministry of Industry, Science and Technology.
- Jones, S. (1993). *Reading, but not reading well - Reading skills at level 3*. Ottawa: National Literacy Secretariat.
- Kasworm, C. E. (1982). Older learners in adult basic education. *Adult Literacy and Basic Education*, 6, 195-207.
- Kasworm, C.E., & Courtenay, B.C. (1982). Functional literacy in older adults: Proactive approaches to research and teaching. Presented at the national adult education conference, Texas. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 229 559)
- Kasworm, C.E., & Medina, R.A. (1989). Perspectives of literacy in the senior adult years. *Educational Gerontology*, 15, 65-79.
- Kingston, A. J. (1979). Reading and the aged: A statement of the problem. *Educational Gerontology*, 4, 205-207.
- Kingston, A. J. (1981). Does literacy really enhance the lives of the elderly? *Reading World*, 20 (3), 169-172.
- Kirsch, I., & Guthrie, J.T. (1978). The concept and measurement of functional literacy. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 13 (4), 485-507.
- Kirsch, I., & Mosenthal, P.B. (1990a). Understanding documents: Forms: Part 1 *Journal of Reading*, 33 (7), 542-545.
- Kirsch, I., & Mosenthal, P.B. (1990b). Understanding documents. Forms: Part 1 *Journal of Reading*, 33 (8), 636-641.
- Lipovenko, D. (1996, December 05). Elderly women at risk: report *Globe and Mail*, pp. 1, 8.
- Lloyd, B. (1991). *Discovering the strength of our voices: Women and literacy programs*. Toronto: Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women.
- Lothian, T. (1992a). *Something special for seniors: Evaluation report 2 on an adult literacy program for seniors*. Ottawa: Centre for the Study of Adult Literacy, Carleton University.
- Lothian, T. (1992b). *Something special for seniors: Evaluation report 3 on an adult literacy program for seniors*. Ottawa: Centre for the Study of Adult Literacy, Carleton University.
- Lothian, T. (1993). *Something special for seniors: Evaluation report 4 on an adult literacy program for seniors*. Ottawa: Centre for the Study of Adult Literacy, Carleton University.

- Lothian, T. (1996). *Learning needs of seniors in four adult basic education programs*. Nepean: Carleton Roman Catholic School Board and the Ontario Training and Adjustment Board. (Unpublished report)
- Lothian, T., & Jones, S. (1991). *Something special for seniors. An evaluation report on tutor training in an adult literacy program for seniors*. Ottawa: Centre for the Study of Adult Literacy, Carleton University.
- Lovelace, T. (1979). Reading activities to enhance the lives of nursing home patients. *Educational Gerontology*, 4, 239-243.
- Luxton, M. (1980). *More than a labour of love: Three generations of women's work in the home*. Toronto: Women's Educational Press.
- McCaffery, J. (1985). Women in literacy and adult basic education: Barriers to access. In M. Hughes & M. Kennedy (Eds.), *New futures: Changing women's education* (pp. 62-68). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- McCluskey, H.Y. (1971). *Background issues in education*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- McGivney, V. (1990). Education for other people: Access to education for non-participant adults. A research report. Leicester, England: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 319 889)
- McMahon, A. T. (1979). Needs for new emphases in social and educational policy toward the elderly. *Educational Gerontology*, 4, 101-113.
- Canadian Press. (1990, September 10). Title. *Medicine Hat News*, pp. xx.
- National Advisory Council on Aging (1990). The NACA position on lifelong learning. *Aging and NACA*, 10. Ottawa: Ministry of Supply and Services.
- Norland, J.A. (1991). *Focus on Canada: Profile of Canada's seniors*. Toronto: Statistics Canada and Prentice Hall Canada, Inc.
- Norman, C. A., & Malicky, G. (1986). Literacy as a social phenomenon: Implications for instruction. *Lifelong Learning*, 9 (7), 12-15.
- Oakley, A. (1981). Interviewing women: A contradiction in terms. In H. Roberts (Ed.), *Doing feminist research* (pp. 30-61). Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- O'Brien, M.A. (1989). Student concepts of literacy learning: The neglected factor in remediation. In M.C. Taylor & J. A. Draper (Eds.), *Adult literacy perspectives* (pp. 301-308). Toronto: Culture Concepts Inc.
- One Voice, The Canadian Seniors Network. (1991). *A national literacy strategy for older Canadians*. Ottawa.
- Patton, M. Q. (1982). *Practical evaluation*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.

- Pearce, S. D. (1991). Toward understanding the participation of older adults in continuing education. *Educational Gerontology*, 17, 451-464.
- Quigley, B.A. (1993). Seeking a voice: Resistance to schooling and literacy. *Adult Basic Education*, 3 (2), 77-90.
- Resnick, D.P., & Resnick, L.B. (1977). The nature of literacy: An historical exploration. *Harvard Educational Review*, 47, 370-385.
- Rigg, P., & Kazemek, F. (1983). Literacy and elders. What we know and what we need to know. *Educational Gerontology*, 9, 417-424.
- Rist, R.C. (1977). On the relations among educational research paradigms. From disdain to détente. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 8, 42-49.
- Robinson, R.D., Haase, A.M., & Bernazza, A. (1979). The reading process and the elderly. *Educational Gerontology*, 4, 223-228.
- Rockhill, K. (1982). Researching participation in adult education: The potential of the qualitative perspective. *Adult Education*, 33 (1), 3-19.
- Rockhill, K. (1987). Gender, language and the politics of literacy. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 8 (2), 153-167.
- Romani, D. (1973). Reading interests and needs of older people. *Library Trends*, 21, 390-403.
- Rootman, I. (1991). Literacy and health in Canada: Contribution of the LSUDA survey. In Statistics Canada (1991a), *Adult literacy in Canada: Results of a national study* (pp. 65-66). Ottawa: Ministry of Industry, Science and Technology.
- Rose, A. M. (1965). The subculture of the aging: A framework for research in social gerontology. In Rose and Peterson (Eds.), *Older people and their social worlds: The subculture of the aging* (pp. 3-16). Philadelphia: F.A. Davis Company.
- Ross, D.P. (1991). Literacy and old age in Canada: The results of the LSUDA survey. In Statistics Canada (1991a), *Adult literacy in Canada: Results of a national study* (pp. 67-68). Ottawa: Ministry of Industry, Science and Technology.
- Rutherford, J. (1989). *Illiteracy for older Canadians: An unrecognized problem*. Ottawa: One Voice: The Canadian Seniors Network and The National Literacy Secretariat.
- Schleppegrell, M. (1987). The older language learner. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 287 313)
- Schuylkill Intermediate Unit #29. (1993, June). The Platinum Historical Literacy Class A 353 Project Final Report. Harrisburg, PA: Pennsylvania State Dept. of Education, Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 367 887)
- Scribner, S. (1984). Literacy in three metaphors. *American Journal of Education*, 93, 6-21.

- Scribner, S. (1988). Unpackaging Literacy. In E.R. Kingten, B.M. Kroll & M. Rose (Eds.), *Perspectives on literacy* (pp. 55-70). Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Seniors Education Centre. (1992). *Saskatchewan older adult literacy survey: Final report*. Regina: University Extension, University of Regina.
- Sharon, A.T. (1973). What do adults read? *Reading Research Quarterly*, 9, 148-169.
- Shotter, J. (1993). Becoming someone: Identity and belonging. In N. Coupland & J. F. Nussbaum (Eds.), *Discourse and life span identity* (pp. 5-27). Newbury Park, CA.: Sage Publications.
- Smith, M. C. (1993). The reading abilities and practices of older adults. *Educational Gerontology*, 19, 417-432.
- Spencer, B. (1980). Overcoming the age bias of continuing education. In G. G. Darkenwald & G. A. Larson (Eds.), *New directions for continuing education: Reaching hard-to-reach adults*, 8 (pp. 71-86). Washington: Jossey-Bass Inc.
- Spore, M. (1980). *Extending basic education to the elderly: A guide to program development*. New York: New York City Technical College. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 207 639)
- Spore, M., & Pierce, S. (1980). Adult basic education and English as a second language: Prospects for integration of education and gerontology. NY.: New York City Technical College. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 210 055)
- Statistics Canada. (1991a). *Adult literacy in Canada: Results of a national study*. Ottawa: Ministry of Industry, Science and Technology.
- Statistics Canada. (1991b). *Where does the time go? General social survey analysis series*. Ottawa: Ministry of Industry, Science and Technology.
- Statistics Canada (1993). *Educational attainment and school attendance: The nation*. Ottawa: Ministry of Industry, Science and Technology.
- Statistics Canada (1995). *Literacy, economy and society: Results of the first international adult literacy survey*. Ottawa: Ministry of Industry.
- Statistics Canada. (1996). *Reading the future: A portrait of literacy in Canada*. Ottawa: Ministry of Industry.
- Stone, L. (1991). *Family and friendship ties among Canada's seniors: Findings from the general social survey*. Ottawa: Ministry of Industry, Science and Technology.
- Street, B. V. (1984). *Literacy in theory and practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Street, B. V. (1989). Literacy -- 'autonomous v. ideological' model. In M.C. Taylor & J. A. Draper (Eds.), *Adult literacy perspectives* (pp. 57-70). Toronto: Culture Concepts Inc.

- Szwed, J. F. (1988). The ethnography of literacy. In E.R. Kingten, B.M. Kroll & M. Rose (Eds.), *Perspectives on Literacy* (pp. 303-311). Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Tannen, D. (1994). *Gender and discourse*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Thomas, A. (1989). Definitions and evolution of the concepts. In M.C. Taylor & J. A Draper (Eds.), *Adult literacy perspectives* (pp. 3-14). Toronto: Culture Concepts Inc.
- Thomas, A. (1990, September). *Encouraging adults to acquire literacy skills*. Ottawa: National Literacy Secretariat.
- UNESCO (1988). *Compendium of statistics on illiteracy*. No. 30. Paris: Division of Statistics on Education. Office of Statistics.
- Von Hahn, M., & Riddell, G. (1979). Effective teaching and programming for older adults. Vancouver, B.C.: Centre for Continuing Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 195 733)
- Weinstein-Shr, G. (1995). Literacy and older adults in the United States. Philadelphia, PA.: National Center on Adult Literacy. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 378 367)

END

1 8 10 6 - 9 7

FIN