

Northwest Practitioner Knowledge Institute

Final Report

From its inception, NCSALL has been committed to using research to improve practice. However, there are few opportunities for practitioners to learn about research findings, develop strategies that use research, or publish the knowledge they develop when they put research into practice. The NCSALL Connecting Practice, Policy, and Research (CPPR) Initiative has designed and implemented a variety of professional development approaches that provide these opportunities. The Northwest Practitioner Knowledge Institute (NWPKI) was designed to enable practitioners from the Northwest states to learn about and apply research conducted by the NCSALL English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Lab School at Portland State University in Portland, Oregon.

The goal of the Northwest Practitioner Knowledge Institute was to improve the quality of services provided to adult students of ESOL programs by

- helping practitioners understand and use the research emerging from the ESOL Lab School
- documenting and sharing practitioners' knowledge and professional wisdom developed in this experience
- improving the Lab School research through input from practitioners who are involved with using their research

The Project Activities

The basic concept of the NWPKI involved bringing teams of teachers and professional development staff to the Lab School to develop their knowledge about the Lab School research, supporting teachers as they developed and implemented research-based instructional strategies in their classrooms, and then providing opportunities to share and evaluate their learning.

NCSALL staff began the project by presenting the idea to state adult education staff in the Northwest. The states interested in participating identified a member of their professional development staff and two teachers to be part of the NWPKI team and paid their team's stipends and travel expenses. Five states—Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Wyoming, and California—decided to take part.

Participants from these states attended a two-day institute held in Portland in October 2004. The teams met each other, toured the Lab School, and met its teachers and researchers. The Lab School teachers and other researchers introduced the latest research findings from the ESOL Lab School. NCSALL staff helped the practitioners to generate and plan specific instructional strategies related to the research findings to apply in their classrooms, a “project” to try out a new approach based on what they had learned from the research. In addition, staff development planners from each state learned about a staff development module based on work of the ESOL Lab School and explored possibilities for using similar modules for professional development in their states¹.

¹ These professional development modules use the *corpus* of data developed at the Lab School. This corpus includes

After the practitioners returned home, they tried out the instructional strategies that they planned during the fall institute and documented their work and results. Seven teachers made changes in how they used pair work (having two students work together on a language activity) based on findings from the Lab School. Four teachers implemented a sustained silent reading approach with their classes based on the findings about such an approach tested at the Lab School. The NCSALL staff provided long-distance support to the practitioners by e-mail and telephone calls. The state professional development staff supported the teachers from their states in a variety of ways, including on-site visits and observations, telephone calls, and e-mail contact.

In May 2005, a second, two-day institute was held in Portland. In this training, practitioners shared their experiences implementing research-based instructional strategies with each other and with Lab School researchers. The participants drew conclusions, based on the experiences of all the teachers, about evidence-based practice in pair-work and sustained silent reading. Each state team developed plans for involving more practitioners in research-based professional development.

Results

At the second institute, the teachers and staff developers evaluated the NWPKI project overall. Participants' evaluations of the project were mostly positive. Teachers appreciated learning about "helpful, valuable, and practical research findings." In their written evaluations, several participants commented on the process used in the project, rating highly aspects such as the "accountability and sharing," "freedom to carry out the project with support there for the asking," "low key encouragement," "being able to work at my own pace," and "being able to explore an area with adult learners." Participants did report being confused or feeling overwhelmed at the beginning of the project. The professional development staff, in particular, expressed frustration at the lack of clarity about their role in the project, although they were supportive of the teachers' experiences.

Outcomes for Teachers: All teachers completed a report about the changes they made in their classroom practices based on the Lab School research, either in the use of pair work or sustained silent reading. The experience, training, and teaching situations of the teachers varied widely and so did the scope of their practitioner knowledge projects. Some focused much more on documentation and data collection than others. The level of support from local programs varied. A few teachers made changes in the middle of their projects based on changes in teaching situations, and the professional development staff changed in one state. Most teachers faced challenges posed by erratic student participation and limited class time. However, all reported learning from their projects and plans to continue changed instructional practices based on research.

Outcomes for Professional Development Staff: The project goals included working with state professional development staff to develop a professional development module using the Lab School media. NCSALL staff prepared a draft version that the state professional development staff reviewed during the fall institute. This module was revised based on their feedback, but due

audio and visual recordings of the two Lab School classes, audio recordings of teacher reflections on the classes, scanned images of student work and class artifacts, written teacher logs, and some written transcriptions of the class recordings.

to technical problems and limited state capacity, only one state piloted the module. The Lab School has since used that module as the basis for designing Web-based professional development. The California professional development team member developed an Internet “blog” as a way to disseminate the work of their NWPKI team. Other states plan to involve NWPKI teachers in state-level professional development. While the professional development resources from the project are not as extensive as originally hoped, there have been continuing results both from the Lab School’s professional development efforts and in the states that participated.

Overall outcomes: The learning participants reported included:

- a new understanding about the research process and how research is designed and conducted, and an increased appreciation of what research can offer practitioners
- specific changes in use of pair work and sustained silent reading in their classes
- increased reflection about their own practice and observations of student behavior and learning.

Lessons Learned

Professional development that brings practitioners together with researchers and involves practitioners in systematically implementing changes in their practice based on research is an effective way to connect research and practice. The Northwest Practitioner Knowledge Institute:

- increased participants’ understanding of and appreciation for research as a tool for improving practice
- led to implementation of particular Lab School research: changes in use of pair-work and implementing a sustained silent reading approach in adult ESOL classes
- provided opportunities for Lab School researchers to learn from practitioners’ experiences
- supported positive changes in teaching approaches, such as more systematic observation, more reflection, and better planning.

Initially, some teachers may be uncomfortable about being involved in a project where the activities are developed as the project moves forward. NCSALL staff asked teachers to learn about emerging research and then make plans and decisions about how to implement what they had learned in their instructional settings. It is important to provide structure and ongoing support to the practitioners in this process. In the NWPKI, teachers made their own implementation plans, but were given tools to help with the planning and for the structure of their final reports. NCSALL and state staff checked in with the teachers as the process went along, and NCSALL staff checked in with the state professional development staff as well. In the final reporting process, participants gave each other feedback on their projects and reports. One teacher facilitated the final editing process for the reports after the spring institute, and this undoubtedly helped some teachers to produce more reflective and clearer reports of what they had done and learned.

Collaborations among state adult education staff and national research institutions provide benefits to both groups. The interest and support of the state adult education organizations gave NCSALL the opportunity to try out this professional development approach. The project broadened the experiences and resources available to the states. The project might have been more effectively integrated in states' professional development plans if there had been a more thorough and inclusive planning process with the states (which would have involved more time and resources). In particular, the role of state professional development staff on the NWPKI teams was not well-planned and changed as the project unfolded. While some of this may be inevitable in a development project, more clarity about what states needed and wanted and were able to provide would have led to better results.