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## Editorial

Welcome to winter! We hope you'll enjoy the variety of topics and themes that this edition of *Fine Print* has to offer. In this issue, we've have taken the opportunity to follow up on the 2002 VALBEC conference by responding to the many requests we had to print papers from various presentations.

Jean Searle's keynote address was one of the popular requests. Searle looks at the history of ALBE and how the field has emerged and evolved over time. She uses this background to compare and contrast current trends: trends that have adult literacy 'mainstreamed' into government agendas, where students are often forced into programs through policy; where funding is restricted; where employment conditions for teachers have been eroded. Searle insists that literacy teachers need to 'reassert themselves as professionals' and above all, she encourages practitioners to take back control of the education agenda.

Helen Macrae and Jacinta Agostinelli take up the theme of women and literacy. Through in-depth interviews Agostinelli fleshes out the motivations and aspirations of three quite different women learners who share their journey of development through literacy. Agostinelli then gives a very honest account of her own experiences as a literacy teacher. It's an account that many women will identify with and questions whether conditions of employment in the adult literacy field are as they are because of the predominance of women. What do you think?

Fran O'Neill covers a project about online learning for people who are Deaf and hard of hearing. The project reveals various pros and cons for learning online and informs us of the various issues that arise when working with students who have hearing impairments.

Michael Chalk conducts an interview with Rob McCormack following up on 'Revisiting the past', which appeared in the autumn edition. McCormack gives us further insights into his

use of rhetoric to teach literacy, his use of reflective judgements and his work with Indigenous students. Cate Thompson and Karen Dymke give us an overview of a program operating in the UK for at-risk youth. This program, they say, is a model of what Australian programs need to strive for.

In Open Forum we have printed Helen Macrae's plenary to the VALBEC conference where she tells us about how VALBEC was established and gives us some vital tips on how we might keep motivated to 'take back control of the education agenda'. In Policy Update, Rosa McKenna looks at a move in the business community to define generic employability skills and the impact that this may have on language, literacy and numeracy education, while Carmel Davies tells us about how she came to be teaching literacy to refugees through the production of plays.

This edition of *Fine Print* was to include a new section, Practical Matters, which is a new initiative in response to feed back from the 2002 conference. We've had a bit of a delay which means that Practical Matters will now start off in spring. Stay tuned, it will cover all sorts of teaching ideas, practical tips and classroom experiences.

Finally, the *Fine Print* Editorial Committee would like to thank the conference participants who gave feedback on *Fine Print*. Overall, the comments were very positive and the requests and suggestions you made for improvement will be implemented further in future editions. But don't just save your comments for the conference forms. Contact us at any time with your requests and observations, your responses to articles and your feedback.

The Editorial Committee

**VALBEC aims to lead the adult literacy field through identifying issues of importance to practitioners and facilitating positive change. This is achieved through networking, professional support, the sharing of information and the promotion of best practice.**

# Policy and passion in ALBE: a discourse about Discourses

by Jean Searle

This article was presented as the keynote address at the VALBEC conference in May 2002.

## Abstract

In this paper I will argue that an understanding of the history of adult literacy and basic education (ALBE) provides a useful background against which current issues, policy formulation and practice can be examined. I shall use Gee's concept of Discourses, along with some extracts from personal narratives of adult literacy practitioners, to build a picture of how the field or Discourse of adult literacy has emerged and evolved over time. In setting this picture against the sociocultural contexts and institutions of the time, it will be possible to explore issues such as definitions of literacy, provision, professionalism and research. This should assist new practitioners to identify with the field, ground current research and practice and inform policy makers. Finally, I will argue that a renewed focus on individuals and the development of their multiliteracies and numeracies in relation to their lifeworlds is the key to preparing people for uncertain futures.

## Introduction

In recent times there has been much discussion and anxiety about the perceived threat to the position of ALBE practitioners. In order to contextualise what many see as a crisis in the field and a general devaluing of the education part of Vocational Education and Training (VET), I will present three brief snapshots in time and through personal narratives consider the notion of multiple identities. These snapshots will also allow an examination of how changing socio-political-economic conditions have shaped definitions of literacy, policy, provision and research. I shall start by outlining some recent work of James Gee (2000–2001), in which he proposes four ways of viewing identity which I shall use as a framework for subsequent discussion as it allows for an examination of tensions for practitioners working within the social institution of education. Secondly, the field of ALBE will be considered within

this framework, as a Discourse, or a 'way(s) of being in the world, or form(s) of life which integrate(s) words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities' (Gee, 1996:127).

## Four ways of viewing identity

The concept of identity is most frequently taken to mean personal identity, also referred to as a core identity or subjectivity—that is, who we really are, our personal beliefs and values. And, as we shall see later, one of the reasons for current anxieties is that there is a tension between this core identity and other social identities which we adopt or which are forced upon us—to be a certain kind of person—to change our identities rather like a chameleon changes colour. Gee (2000–2001:100) proposes four ways of viewing what I will call social identities, and these are presented in Table 1 below.

These identities are not hierarchical or sequential, for at any one time they all play a part. What is important is the complex interrelationships among the identities and how they shift over time, how they are formed and sustained. As I give some examples you might like to consider your own multiple identities.

First, the nature identity. This is the force over which we have no control, basically our genetic makeup: our gender, ethnicity, and physical being (for some a disability). However, this is not to suggest that the nature of individuals is not or cannot be modified by social situations or the workings of social forces.

The second perspective is the institutional identity, or your position in relation to authorities. In my case this is a university, but in yours it may be a Tertiary and Further Education (TAFE) institute, a community centre or government department. You will be positioned in relation to the institution though the various mechanisms of power (rules, regulations, audits, traditions and so on) which authorise you to play a particular

**Table 1: Four ways to view identity**

Process		Power	Source of power
1 Nature identity: a state	developed from	forces	in nature
2 Institution identity: a position	authorised by	authorities	within institutions
3 Discourse identity: an individual trait	recognised in	the discourse/dialogue	of/with 'rational' individuals
4 Affinity identity: experiences	shared in	the practice	of 'affinity groups'

role. For your students, the institution may be a workplace or a government agency—Centrelink, in which case the student's identity may be officially recognised as being in deficit—unemployed, needing basic literacy and numeracy.

The third perspective on identity is the discursive identity, that is your identity as being a particular type of person (outgoing, empathetic, resourceful) is recognised by others through their everyday discourse or language use. So you may be perceived by others to be a yuppie, a radical activist or a nerd. Or you may refashion yourself for a particular market. For example, some young people who to us may exhibit attention deficit disordered behaviour construct themselves as the creative, fluid thinkers so desired by the information technology industry.

Finally, the fourth perspective—affinity identity. This perspective comprises people who choose to belong to a group (perhaps online) to share similar experiences and participate in specific practices. Examples include being a member of a fan club or street gang. However increasingly, the concept of affinity groups is being taken up by industry. At the global level, multinationals employ groups of elite symbolic analysts, systems designers who travel the world setting up company systems. Locally, some enterprises are beginning to see the value of having a group of trained core workers who move from project to project—an issue which was identified during a recent ALNARC research project (Searle & Kelly, in press). Closer to home, groups of adult literacy learners have formed themselves into particular communities of learners who connect and share with others through email and websites. While not directly the product of an institution, these groups may well be institutionally sanctioned.

So what does all this mean? Firstly, that we all have multiple identities which can be interpreted in different ways: through historical and cultural views of nature, through institutional rules or traditions, through the dialogue or discourse of others, or through the workings of affinity groups. Secondly, we can negotiate or contest the ways that others construct our identities—but do we?

### Identities and discourses

As mentioned earlier, at any particular time an individual will be recognised through a combination of identities or 'way(s) of being in the world, or form(s) of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities' (Gee, 1996: 127). Any configuration of these identities which results in the individual being seen as a certain kind of person or a member of a group, whether it be bird watching or bikies, is what Gee refers to as a Discourse. Gee makes a distinction between Discourse(s) as 'ways of being in the world' and discourse or 'any connected stretch of language'. Discourses have the capacity to adapt to, react to, or shape an environment. And it is this capacity to be flexible, to absorb new ideas and adapt to change, which has allowed the field of ALBE—which I suggest is a Discourse—to continue to exist, despite the tensions and realignments which contribute to, or have resulted from, change. As we shall see when I present three brief snapshots in time:

Discourses, by their very nature, cannot have discreet boundaries...They are made up of coordinations which are 'enough alike' to count as the 'same', coordinations which are always changing and moving through history (and whose elements are always being contested by other Discourses) (Gee, 1997: xv–xvi).

But, before I introduce the snapshots I just want to explain what I mean by the term social institution.

### Education as a social institution

In this paper, education is considered to be a social institution, which is perceived by society as being a social good (Gee, 1996). That is, there is still a general perception in society that individuals have a right to education, and that access to education should extend beyond the compulsory years of schooling. However, the nature of this social institution, which I shall refer to as the 'educational institution', has changed over time. Initially, the dominant Discourses within the educational institution reflected a general or liberal educational tradition—that is, they provided for individual, social and civic development. These Discourses included the dominant Discourses of primary, secondary and tertiary education, and the less powerful adult education or further education, and technical education Discourses. More recently, however, the Vocational Education and Training (VET) Discourse, with its emphasis on training and competent performance, has absorbed TAFE and now occupies increasing amounts of space within the educational institution.

Within the educational institution are a number of social organisations which may be identified as organs of the institution (Butler, 1998) which perform a socialising role. In the case of the educational institution these include Commonwealth and state government departments and state training authorities, TAFE colleges/institutes, professional and organisational bodies such as ACAL and state adult literacy councils, ANTA and industry training bodies, and networks of private training providers. The interrelationships among individuals, organisations and institutions are manifested in changing power relations and are reflected in the changing discourses of literacy through time. The following snapshots will indicate how this has worked in relation to ALBE.

### Snapshots in time

#### Phase 1: 1970s—Nascent field

In the early 1970s, the social institution of education (shortened to educational institution) comprised a number of Discourses which conformed to a traditional view of education (educational tradition). The relationships among these Discourses in Phase 1 are mapped in Figure 1 as they compete for space within firstly, the educational tradition, and more broadly within the educational institution.

While the actual dimensions of power are speculative, the model depicted in Figure 1 comprises a representation of the perceived strengths and alignments of a range of Discourses within the educational institution. The discourses

from both primary and secondary education were firstly, that as schooling was compulsory, no-one could emerge illiterate. Secondly, if there was a problem of adult illiteracy then it was a personal problem; somehow the person had failed. However, certain individuals, working in isolation from each other and from education departments, sought to challenge this view. As there was no professional space available within the dominant Discourses, the early practitioners worked in a voluntary capacity within the community and often in isolation from each other. However, members of the dominant Discourses, namely school teachers, did not appreciate outsiders contesting their institutional space. As an illustration of gate-keeping, one practitioner recalled:

A few of the teachers completely misunderstood me. Like, 'How dare she do this, she's had no training'. But when I put it in their camp, they didn't want anything to do with it. So there wasn't any choice...I can't even remember when the first tutor training thing officially started but you see I wouldn't have been game to start anything because I just felt I didn't know anything and then I suddenly realised I knew more than anybody else did because I was actually doing it. (practitioner interview, April 19, 1995, in Searle, 1999)

This early period was characterised by committed individuals who were working often under considerable physical and financial constraints; from strong religious or humanist convictions in order to assist adults who were disempowered in terms of access to education and other social goods. Jane Mace commented on a similar situation which existed in the UK:

The Right to Read campaign was striking because it was about reading and also because it was about 'an entitlement', an idea about people who had been 'disfranchised' so that there was a sort of zeal—I still look back on it with a mix of feelings. There was a 'zeal' and a sense of purpose (interview April 7, 1997, in Searle, 1999).

At this time, the adult literacy discourse was of literacy being a fundamental human right, not a privilege. As a result, members of the field could be identified, through their adherence to these discourses, to a common set of beliefs and to adult literacy pedagogies. Secondly, as a member of the ALBE Discourse, practitioners accepted as a rule of membership the responsibility to act as both advocate and gatekeeper for the field. In short, practitioner core identities were closely aligned with the discourse and affinity identities of the time—less so with institutional identities.

#### Phase 2: End of 1988 to 1993—Consolidation of the field.

This period of time was marked by Bob Hawke's transformation of the nation from 'the complacent Lucky Country to the Productive Country, the Innovative and Hard Working Country' (Bob Hawke, cited in Kelly, 1992: 386). Award restructuring resulted in the reduction in the number of job classifications and demarcation, and the replacement of time-served apprenticeships with a competency-based approach. Not only was this time a turning point for industry and training but it also marked a change in status for adult literacy, from a relatively small scale, community-orientated, marginalised field based on humanistic principles, to being a cornerstone of economic reform.

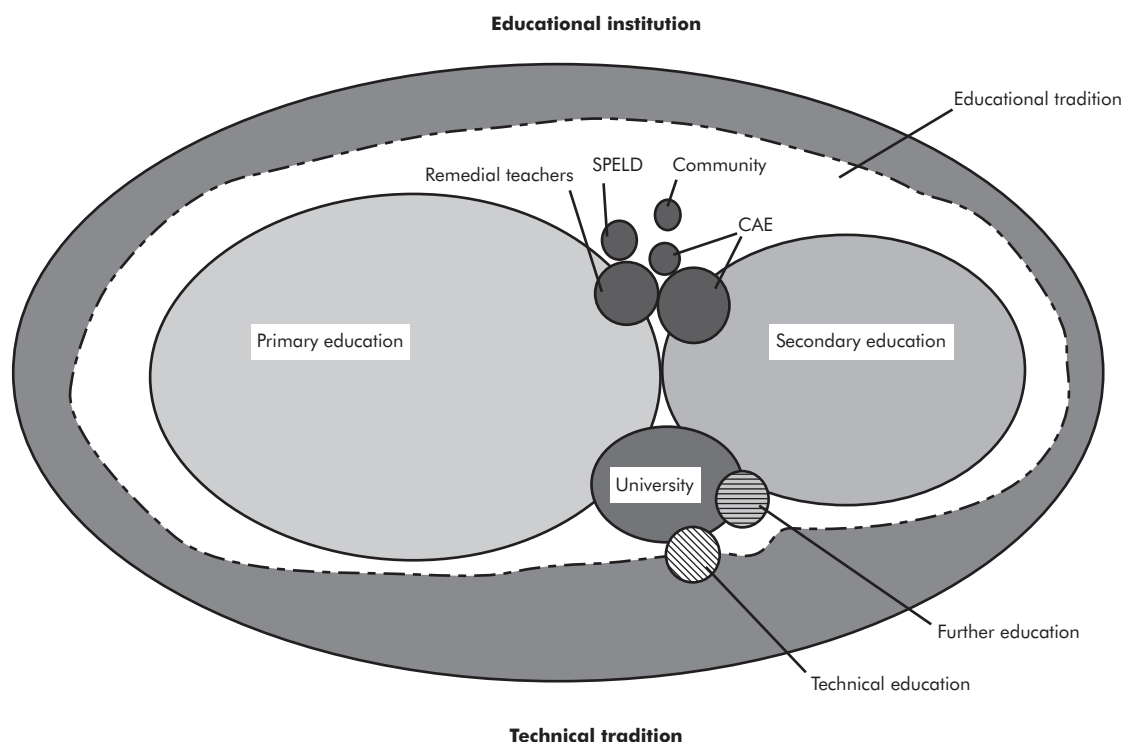


Figure 1: Discourses within the educational institution in Phase 1

Once that realisation came, certainly those of us involved in the adult literacy movement, have been keen to point out to government, it is not possible to have successful retraining programs for a number of people in the workforce unless you first of all provide them with the opportunity to develop adult literacy and basic education (Simpson, 1988: 4).

As the Commonwealth Government responded to directions from industry, so the educational institution at national and state levels was redefined. The Discourse of the compulsory education sector remained that associated with general education and higher education within the educational tradition. Meanwhile, driven by the imperative to meet industry needs, the Discourse of the post-compulsory sector built on the technical education tradition to become that of VET. By 1993, Paul Keating was arguing that to become a member of the global economy Australia had to move from being a Banana Republic to being a Clever Country. Hence, along with other reforms, the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) was established. So, VET was competing for space within the educational institution, as depicted in Figure 2.

At the same time as VET was becoming a dominant force, previous institutional commitments to social justice, access and equity were replaced by the twin goals of efficiency and productivity. Meanwhile, new literacy Discourses were emerging in response to the promulgation of International Literacy Year (1990). The following year the Australian Language and Literacy Policy (ALLP) provided funding for labour market programs including the Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) program. As funding also

became available for research projects and a languages and literacy institute, a literacy market emerged which attracted the attention of new players, consultants and academics. This resulted in the literacy Discourses (child, adult and ESL) becoming sites of contestation, as academic Discourses aggressively colonised them, carving out new territory and market niches. Legitimacy was accorded to literacy through the development of a new discipline of literacy studies and to adult literacy through the initiation of a range of teacher qualifications and research centres.

Despite gaining legitimacy in academic terms the ALBE field was still in an extremely weak position within the educational institution. If adult literacy was to be taken seriously as a new and vital field, ALBE had to reposition itself. While some commentators argue that the field was co-opted and colonised by the VET Discourse (Lee & Wickert, 1995), others suggest that as funding was aligned with vocational and employment outcomes it appeared that there was no option but to reposition adult literacy within the broader VET Discourse. This move was not without its problems. VET was being driven by industry, not by the education sectors. With the opening up of the training market, adult literacy provision was no longer confined to a few community or TAFE programs. The result was that the integrity of the adult literacy field was under threat. On the one hand there was a shortage of qualified teachers of adult literacy, and on the other there were a number of redeployed vocational teachers and a new range of private providers in workplaces and SkillShares. In a protectionist move to preserve the integrity the field, while at the same time maintaining recognition and parity with other educators (in general education and migrant education),

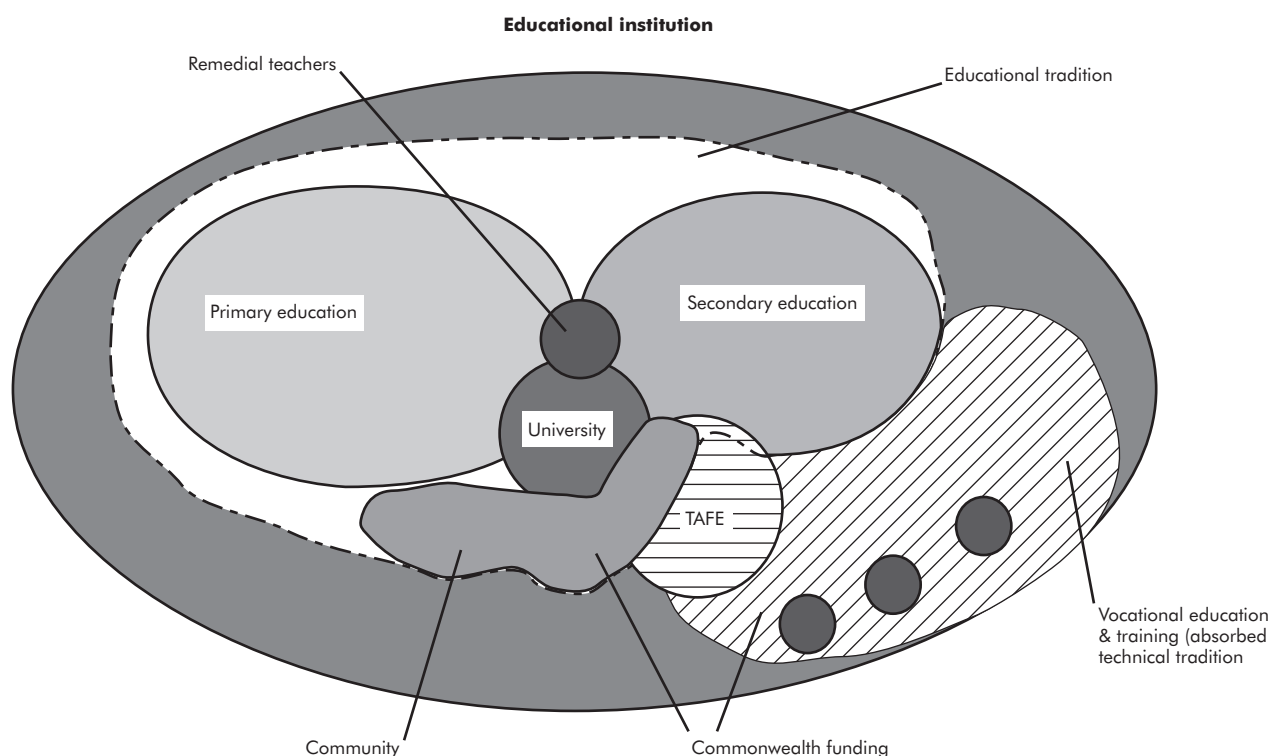


Figure 2: Discourses within the educational institution in Phase 2

there was a conscious move to professionalise the field and strengthen the boundaries. Firstly, gate-keeping, through the formalisation of adult literacy and numeracy qualifications. Secondly, through the development of the National Framework of AELLNC, competency-based curricula and later the National Reporting System. The following extracts from an interview gives you a flavour of the times:

So anyway we looked at the national framework and yes, (Certificate in Vocational Access) CNLO3 was generated from that. Because it (the national framework) was still at a fairly early stage, we had them (Sharon Coates and associates) come up and talk to us and we had a one day workshop with the three of us. And we were trying to come up with some way of organising it so that it wasn't too hard to map against it. And yet I didn't ever believe that you should have one aspect as separate, I believed that our students should have them all, so that was how we came up with the outcome from each. Now at the time, remember, CBT was really really new. Trying to get anybody who could give us anything or answers on the shape of things (was difficult). It was changing by the day and nobody was telling us. So we had to grapple with a lot of those problems and we came up with something, you know, a design today and then two months later, oh no, it's all different. So, we were doing it at a time of huge disparate changes and I think it is a fairly literal interpretation of the national framework. It is meant to have enormous flexibility within it, but it is not always read like that. It is often read very literally as well...And it is still hugely problematic in literacy because if you do design a task, at the end how can you be sure what all those components will make it up? You know, the things like the grammar and the spelling and those things which become, unfortunately, the focus of the teaching. You know, how do you get your assessment task to take in all the aspects? So I don't know if we ever will resolve those issues (policy officer 1 interview, November 17, 1997, in Searle, 1999).

The policy issues which we were dealing with for practitioners around the state were workplace and labour market programs. (Also) assessment questions because that was the year of the ALAN scales and...the responses to them and the ACAL Forum and ... So there was a parallel life going on here with national stuff (policy officer 2, interview June 30, 1995, in Searle, 1999).

However, practitioners were becoming aware of their competing identities in trying to work within very different Discourses. There was a tension between the economic rationalist approach of governments at state and federal levels, with their reductionist views of literacy and competence, and the liberal-humanist philosophies which traditionally had underpinned adult literacy practice.

We are still meeting the political agenda and I think it is only the dedication, absolute dedication of literacy

teachers who really have a philosophy that's absolutely student-centered that allows us to manage in spite of the systems and still stay student-focused and I think that is one of the nice things about literacy that most of us are really very deeply philosophically involved and care very much about our students. It gives us the power and the resourcefulness, deviousness, if you like, to manage in spite of the systems and it's always been there in some different way, different form, and it is certainly there at the moment with the new curriculum and everything where we have to still keep focused on our students but make it fit into the new guidelines that have been presented to us (practitioner interview, May 10, 1995, in Searle, 1999).

In this phase, ALBE teachers needed to build and maintain a stronger position within VET so they, in turn, became gatekeepers. They needed to reinforce their boundaries against external threats, so they used the very concept which had worked against the early practitioners—educational capital, as a means of exclusion. This new professionalism legitimised the field as a Discourse separate from, but recognised by, other language and literacy Discourses and, to some extent, by VET. While it is argued that adult literacy developed as a Discourse in its own right, at the same time it had been appropriated by the dominant Discourses to meet other political and economic imperatives. However, in so doing, the needs of the community were often overlooked in this time of industry-led reform.

### Phase 3: Post 1996—Field in danger of fragmentation.

Up to this point in time, the educational institution had been marked by an increased polarisation of Discourses into those which followed the educational tradition and others within the vocational education and training tradition. In this phase, the dominant Discourses were brought closer together under the concept of convergence. To some extent, this resulted in a blurring of boundaries between general education and VET, as vocational subjects were now introduced into secondary schools. Another element of the VET Discourse was the move from being a public service system towards a market-driven, training economy. At the same time deregulation opened up the training market to a diverse range of public and private providers, with the beginning of a user-pays system. So the locus of control had changed. The expressed needs of business and industry were driving the VET Discourse and these interests were often in conflict with those of the education profession. The policies of deregulation, devolution and diversification resulted in former colleagues within the adult literacy field being repositioned in relation to each other, and each others' role.

Increasingly TAFE started being looked on as a provider, and...the policy was (for policy and provision) to happen separately...So 'A' was over there (in TAFE) and meanwhile I'm over in (the state training board) and there was no sort of link or relationship or hardly anything.

Newstart (funding) changed to SIP funding so it was a different regime and then TAFE took on almost a contractual arrangement with SIP. So 'A' was

administering what became in 1993 the ANTA literacy money. Before that it was the DEETYA money. When she would have got there (1992) it was called VOAL, Vocational Orientation Adult Literacy money, that was the old Commonwealth money that the state used to get and was distributed to the colleges and largely paid for the adult literacy tutors, etc. In 1993, with the development of ANTA, it became ANTA literacy money, so 'A' administered that. Twenty-five per cent went into Community Literacy (program) grants under 'B'..., and 'A' administered the TAFE component, so the colleges put in for that. But it really didn't do a lot more than, well, it paid a lot for the part-time classes. Now, as well as that they had the full-time teachers who were permanent staff and then there developed some profile money that took a long time coming. (State Profiles, proper profile money for language and literacy, has really only been there for the last couple of years, it is taking a long time to get (a) to get the system to put it there and (b) to get teachers to have any understanding of where it is and what to do with it. So (there is) a huge change of mindset from the grant type of arrangements that were previously there (policy officer 1, interview, November 17, 1997, in Searle, 1999).

Although the bureaucrats were not as powerful as previously, they did have a knowledge of organisational history which is not necessarily the case today. Secondly, although the staff were dispersed and their official relationships, or institutional identities, were separated, they still maintained close personal links and affinity identities through membership of the adult literacy Discourse. The dispositions of the major traditions in Phase 3, and the relationship of the adult literacy field to the major Discourses are represented in Figure 3.

It can be seen that the shape of the adult literacy Discourse has become even more fluid in this phase. While remaining firmly embedded within, and responsive to, the needs of the community through the role of community groups and state councils, the adult literacy Discourse has become more inclusive. The Discourse includes the practitioners and practices within TAFE, as well as those of a range of workplace and private providers in VET. There is also a tentative but emerging recognition of adult literacy expertise by members of the general education Discourse, particularly those involved in senior schooling who are faced with providing literacy tuition for adolescents. Further, legitimacy was been afforded to the field through the strengthening of adult literacy and numeracy research (through ANTA innovative grants and the formation of the Adult Literacy and Numeracy Australian Research Consortium).

Meanwhile, in most states the TAFE response to open competition was to rationalise programs, offer voluntary early retirement, and move towards increased casualisation with short-term teaching contracts while at the same time demanding increased staff accountability. This move towards de-professionalisation actually assisted in redefining the field. Some experienced, committed adult literacy practitioners who were not prepared to compromise their principles left TAFE to become private providers. However, where they have been replaced it is often with less experienced contract staff who are required to conduct short-term courses at low cost. At the same time, deregulation has seen a dramatic increase in the number of private providers not previously associated with the field but drawn in by the new training market. Most recently there has been another re-drawing of boundaries with the implementation of the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) with the minimum standard of delivery of

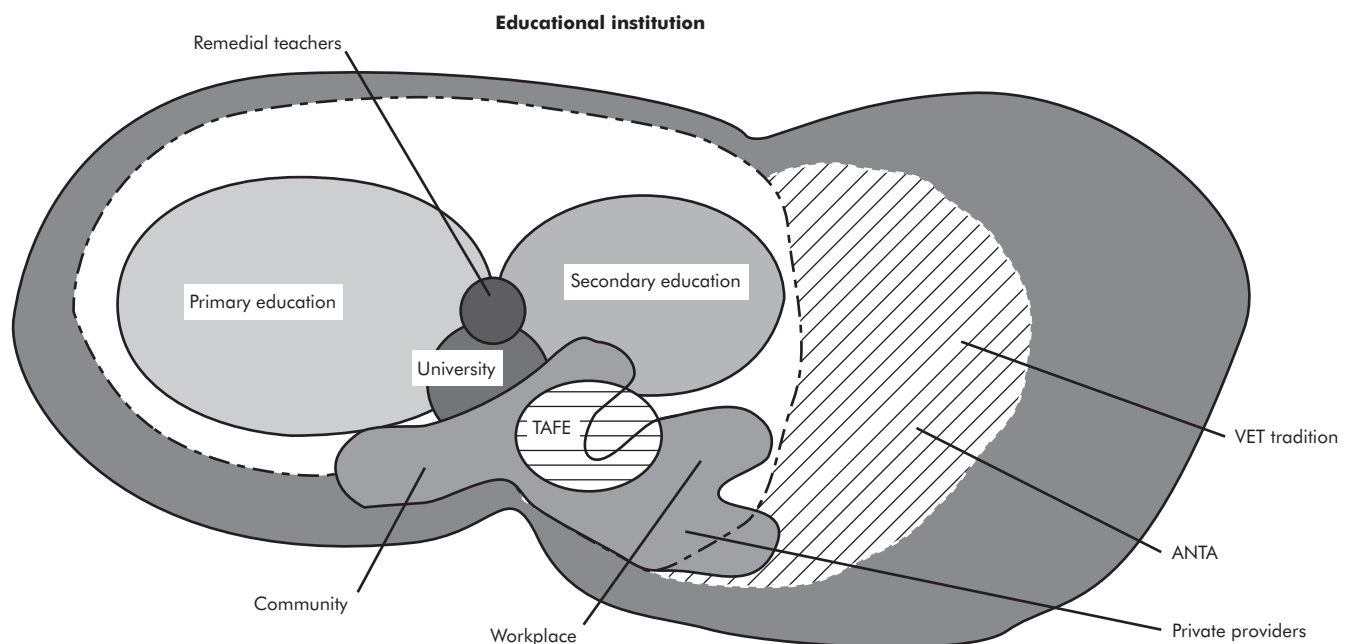


Figure 3: Discourses within the educational institution in Phase 3



training packages being Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training plus industry qualifications.

In summary, these three snapshots have provided a brief background against which to discuss some of the issues facing practitioners today, which I have titled 'practitioner's work in changing times'.

### Practitioner's work in changing times

In this section I plan to outline some of the issues facing practitioners today, which fundamentally result from tensions among competing identities.

#### Issue 1—Some tensions resulting from competing identities

Some members of the adult literacy Discourse are finding it difficult to adhere to their fundamental beliefs, their core identities, while at the same time complying with the imposed agendas of the dominant VET Discourse. For example, it is difficult to cater for individual needs within a modular, competency-based curriculum which has vocational or employment-focused outcomes. If cost per student contact hour is the basic selection criteria in the tendering process, then issues such as class size, minimum staff qualifications, and efficiencies in resourcing lead to a reductionist view of learning. As Nancy Jackson (1993: 157) states:

The emphasis shifts to what is learned through 'textual mediation' of documentation, rather than through curiosity, serendipity, experience or action. The entire process turns out to have little or nothing to do with the competence of individuals; it is about policing a particular narrow mode of delivering instruction and creating a 'warrantable set of procedures'.

Moreover, teachers may be trapped to varying degrees in their personal as well as profession histories (Smyth, 2001), swept up in the discourses of powerful institutions which, as we have seen, have been constructed over time, without teachers being in a position to challenge the institutional identities being forced upon them. However, some practitioners did resist through what I call working in the cracks or what Seddon & Brown (1997) refer to as becoming strategic re-professionalisers. These are people who Jane Mace (1994) suggests, reconceptualise the principle of 'meeting individual needs' as 'learning about student interests or concerns' in such a way that literacy becomes a situated practice, embedded within a meaningful, relevant, social activity.

#### Issue 2—Deregulation and deprofessionalisation of the field

With the move towards the convergence of general and vocational education, and the shift towards the integration of language, literacy and numeracy competencies in industry standards and training packages, the sites of practice have broadened. With literacy being mainstreamed into government agendas either as a basic skill (which everyone requires for entry into employment) or an underpinning skill for vocational education and training, literacy programs now operate in schools, workplaces, prisons, the community and a range of institutions. In some respects the field has promoted literacy too well. High school teachers now need to be teachers of

literacy, vocational teachers and industry trainers need to accept responsibility for integrating literacy into their curricula, and workplace assessors need to understand literacy implications for assessment. But do they? The tension for adult literacy teachers lies in trying to support these people as well as continue in a more traditional role. Given the nature of program funding, many teachers are employed on short-term contracts and may be required to coordinate a volunteer tutor program, take one or more TAFE or community classes, which may be LANT, or a mixed disability class, or a workplace program (WELL). At the same time, they may be required to advise vocational teachers regarding literacy in training packages, support vocational students, or assess individuals referred from Centrelink while also fulfilling tendering and reporting requirements. Not only do today's teachers need to be multi-skilled and flexible, they also require the stamina to continue in the face of at least three challenges.

Firstly, there is the diversity of students. Some, if not many of whom may resent the coercive policy of Mutual Obligation that has resulted in their presence in class. Secondly, a reductionist, basic skills approach to literacy training is advocated by the government. While teaching decontextualised skills may suit some practitioners, it represents a return to what Street (1984) called an 'autonomous', deficit model of literacy which is viewed with antipathy by those in the adult literacy Discourse. Finally, in some programs, literacy teachers are required to act as agents of the government, not only to ensure that students attend programs as required, but also that they progress in a specified way, after a maximum of 400 hours of participation, using a measure that was designed as a reporting, rather than an assessment instrument.

The problem is that those practitioners who strive to maintain traditional beliefs and values are viewed by the new breed of VET managers as recalcitrant 'dinosaurs', as they appear reluctant to comply with the commodification of education as 'entrepreneurs' (Smyth, 2001; Seddon, 1997). Those who are valued in this new work order or 'enchanted workplace' ('enchanted' as being under a spell) are a new form of 'knowledge worker' (Gee & Lankshear, 1997)—those who are willing to transform practices, to redesign and market products for specific niche markets (Gee, 1999). Further, the reduction in resources and professional development has proceeded hand in glove with increased auditing and accountability measures—what Smyth (2001: 13) refers to as 'imposed surveillance'. In this way, teachers' work is being redefined. Teachers are no longer seen as educated professionals but as competent technicians. We are, in effect, being de-skilled. White (1983) argues that together with this downgrading of teacher status, the fragmentation of educational 'rich tasks' into units of competence, brings the knowledge possessed by teachers or 'mental' workers into line with that of 'process' workers. As a result, ALBE practitioners are in danger of becoming a new type of marginalised service worker whose expertise is not needed, or wanted. According to Smyth (2001: 46), what we have is not a crisis of competence but a crisis of confidence.

What is necessary for the ALBE Discourse to survive is for those of us who have been operating in the field for some time to

reassert that adult literacy teachers are professionals as, 'the status of teachers depends ultimately on the public recognition of what teachers do and this requires a public renewal of professionalism' (Seddon & Brown, 1997: 32). Hedley Beare (1992) argues that to be a professional requires a sense of vocation as well as a depth of knowledge of a particular field of learning from which to 'profess'. Practice then becomes the application of that knowledge and learning to the benefit of others. So, while practising strategic compliance with administrators, teachers need to take it upon themselves to use their years of experience to generate practical politics. In the 1990s this took the form of being assertive in rejecting the ALAN scales and being proactive in developing the Interim Literacy Course Matrix (ILCM) prior to the implementation of the National Reporting System (Coates, Fitzpatrick, McKenna & Makin, 1995). Now, in the short term, in relation to AQTF Standard 7, it means ensuring that accredited language, literacy and numeracy courses have appropriate human resource statements. In the longer term, it may mean working with others to establish an education ITAB, or, as Wilson and Corbett (2000) state, it may be about practitioners 'enabling each (other) to be sources of valuable craft and research-based knowledge'. But above all ALBE practitioners need to regain control of the education agenda.

### Issue 3—What is the agenda?

We have seen that by actively promoting literacy and numeracy as economic skills underpinning training, they have become absorbed into the VET agenda. While funding became available for a range of labour market programs, this action also opened up a can of worms. Literacy and numeracy are now constructed as competencies which have economic value. Thus it is convenient for governments to blame the individual for low productivity, or as Hodgens (1994:17) suggests, the relatively low skill levels of society as indicated by national surveys are interpreted as 'an indicator of a deeper institutional malaise. The moral order of society itself is seen to be at stake'. This is highlighted in the following quotation from the OECD:

In recent years, adult literacy has come to be seen as crucial to the economic performance of industrialised nations. Literacy is no longer defined merely in terms of a basic threshold of reading ability, mastered by almost all those growing up in developed countries. Rather, literacy is now being seen as how adults use written information to function in society. Today, adults need a higher level of literacy to function well; society has become more complex and low-skill jobs are disappearing. *Therefore, inadequate levels of literacy among a broad section of the populations potentially threaten the strength of economies and the social cohesion of the nation.* (OECD, 1995: 13).

So, if there is a belief that a lack of literacy could trigger a national crisis, then literacy training will be used as a threat or weapon of oppression. Thus, the long-term unemployed have a mutual obligation to become literate and numerate or be breached, while some employers will continue to (mis)use the National Reporting System to screen potential employees. However, as Gee (1990:27) asserts:

Literacy is a socially contested term. We can choose to use this word in any of several different ways. Each such choice incorporates a tacit or overt ideological theory about the distribution of social goods and has important social and moral consequences.

Rather than focus on individual deficit, we could choose to look at what people do with literacy. Like Gee's concept of multiple identities, we can see that as each Discourse has its own discourse. We should be concerned with the multiple ways in which people engage in reading, writing or enumerating. As new technologies are developed, new literacies and literate practices emerge—just think of the number of young people these days who communicate through text messaging. This means that we have to reassess our own starting points and assumptions and move beyond the VET agenda to look at the broader agendas of lifelong learning and community renewal. Recently there have been a number of research projects in the UK, South Africa, Australia and North America, which collectively come under the title New Literacy Studies (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Prinsloo & Breire, 1996; Falk & Harrison, 1998; Castleton & McDonald, in press). These studies have at their core an examination of the different varieties of literate and numerate practice across social groupings in society. They explore the nexus between what they refer to as public literacies (institutional literacies) and vernacular literacies (personal local literacies). They also problematise the notion of community in terms of the knowledges and capacities for collaboration, networking and community development. The importance of such work is that it goes beyond the economic imperative to produce knowledge workers, in order to investigate the links with lifelong learning and the possibilities of developing civic responsibility or social capital within communities.

### Sustainable literacies and lifelong learning

So, instead of defining literacy in terms of the dominant discourses of new capitalism, which Mary Hamilton (2000) argues are legitimised by standardised assessments or 'international regimes of truth', we should be advocating an alternative view which focuses on the multiliteracies of people's lifeworlds. At a recent conference, one presenter argued quite powerfully against the concept of the stereotypical adult literacy student with poor self esteem. Her students from the poorest neighbourhoods of New York came together to produce a book *Neighbors Talk* (currently out of print) which, as one contributor states, included 'stories, poems, raps from people in my community that speak to our survival skills, our spirit and our visions for the future. There are people who need to read from us that we're still here and we ain't leaving' (*Neighbours Talk* promotional material, no date).

The work of Barton & Hamilton (1998) among others indicates that the literacies which are influential and valued in people's lives are not acknowledged by the powerful VET institutions, yet they are essential for individuals' health, financial survival and civic participation. This is therefore the focus of the multiliteracies projects of The New London Group, a group of ten US, UK and Australian researchers, who came together to challenge what is seen as a 'cynical, manipulative, invasive

and exploitative...(appropriation) of private and community lifeworlds to serve commercial and institutional ends' (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). This group is concerned with how globalisation and the increased dominance of technology have blurred the separation of public and private lives (with television programs such as *Survivor* and *Big Brother*). We have been introduced to a mass media culture (as evidenced by the media control of sporting events), a culture of technology (with text messaging, use of the Internet and so on) and a global commodity culture or fetishism (the 'must have' Nike 'swoosh'). So we need to be addressing new literacies and numeracies which address:

...the increasing multiplicity and integration of significant modes of meaning-making, where textual is also related to the visual, the audio, the spatial, the behavioural...'multimedia' and in electronic 'hypermedia'...to focus on the realities of increasing local diversity and global connectedness (Cope & Kalantzis, 1995:6).

We need to be looking at literacies and numeracies as aspects of sustainable lifelong learning. This could involve advocacy for a whole-of-government approach to planning for the literacies and numeracies of the future. But it could also be viewed from the perspectives of community partnerships which embrace integrated services and infrastructure, and which promote community wellbeing, social cohesion and quality of life as articulated through four aspects of education for the future (adapted from Delors (1996). We need the literacies and numeracies for:

- Knowing—mastering analytic tools to sift through the plethora of information available through new technologies rather than acquisition of structured knowledge.
- Doing—equipping people for the types of work needed now and in the future including innovation, analysis and adaptation of learning to future work environments.
- Living together and with others—peacefully resolving conflict, discovering other people and their cultures, fostering community capability, individual competence and capacity, economic resilience, and social inclusion.
- Being—education contributing to a person's complete development: mind and body, intelligence, sensitivity, aesthetic appreciation and spirituality.

Finally, we need to be able to manage uncertainty and communicate across and within cultures, communities and families. To do this we need to become community activists, to open up spaces for dialogue, and to urge ourselves and others to rethink the current social and political agendas.

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knowledge such as literacy and numeracy. This experience could be used to better capture the employability generic skills desired by employers. For example, there are models of writing units of competencies specifying the types of literacy and numeracy practices required for effective workplace communication that aid training and can be assessed. These may include some core units or involve packaging and co-assessment rules that ensure that generic skills cannot be ignored. The literature confirms that transitions from education institutions to work are frequently aided by workplace learning or experience and support the view that the cultural and communication practices of organisations are best learnt as one develops the technical and job-related skills.

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# Women and literacy in Australia: a closer look

by Helen Macrae and Jacinta Agostinelli

Queensland ALNARC commissioned this paper from Women in Adult and Vocational Education (WAVE) for an online policy forum held in March 2002. It was written for WAVE Consultancy, a project management agency established by WAVE. The writers acknowledge the assistance of Jude Newcombe, Delia Bradshaw, Sarah Deasey and Cathy Donovan.

## Introduction

To write this paper we framed questions and discussed them with members of WAVE at Glenroy Neighbourhood Learning Centre (GNLC), a key adult literacy teaching agency in Melbourne's inner north for the past 25 years.

- What kind/s of literacy are we thinking about for this paper? Reading, writing, numeracy, science, technology, emotions, public life, democracy?
- What understanding of feminism does WAVE bring to literacy?
- What stories cast light on women as literacy learners? Why do they come? What dreams? What circumstances do they wrestle with? Do specific women's issues—domestic violence, inequity in the labour market, child birth and so on—impinge on women and literacy? How?

Most literacy teachers are women. Sit amongst any gathering of them and you get fewer than one man to every ten women.

- What are their issues for curriculum in its broadest sense—boundaries, content, teaching practice?
- What qualities does a good literacy teacher need?
- Why are there so few men—low pay rates? Unease with a demanding teaching task that calls on an ability to nurture as well as free the learner?
- What are the opportunities and threats in literacy teaching?
- What system-wide issues have an impact for good or bad on women as teachers/learners/managers in the literacy field? Structures for delivery, curriculum development, resources, funding policies, certification, professional development?
- What impact will literacy/ies have on women's lives—public, private and work—in the next few years?

## We set three parameters for this paper.<sup>1</sup>

### 1 Literacy

Terms such as visual literacy, economic literacy, emotional literacy and technical literacy are unhelpful if their use draws attention, resources and effort away from the critical importance of the skills and knowledge required to read written text, generate written text, and use spoken words to communicate effectively.

Language, whether spoken or recorded in text, needs content and context to give it meaning. Visual, scientific, political, artistic, emotional and vocationally-specific skills and knowledge belong to a definition of literacy in as much as they give essential meaning and context to speech and to language-based text. They are also, in themselves, modes of communicating meaning through the generation of texts.

We define and affirm adult literacy education as a broad general education grounded in language, which fosters depth and breadth in connections and critical thinking. The competency approach, which drives the pedagogy of vocational education, limits the scope of a broad general education grounded in language, unless defined broadly enough to encompass subject knowledge; language, literacy and numeracy skills; learning to learn; critical analysis; and action and reflection, no matter what is taught, nor at what level of sophistication it is taught.<sup>2</sup>

### 2 Feminism

WAVE is a national feminist network for women who work and study in Australian adult and vocational education. We provide advice and advocacy on behalf of members, promote social justice and equity in and through adult and vocational education, build areas of mutual cooperation with other organisations and undertake research.<sup>3</sup>

Joan Kirner says feminism is the belief that 'women matter as much as men'.<sup>4</sup> In material co-authored with Moira Rayner she argues that institutions must change so that power is shared between women and men, opportunities are shared equally between men and women, and all are treated justly and fairly.<sup>5</sup> Whether you are a man or a woman, whether you call yourself a feminist or not, if you have a vision for a just ACE (adult and community education) and VET (vocational education and training) sector, if you want power distributed more equally, and if you work for equal opportunity for women and men as learners and teachers in ACE and VET, then WAVE shares your vision.

Literacy is a feminist issue too. If women are under represented or under paid in government-funded literacy programs, for example, the interests of equal opportunity are not served.

### 3 The ground of lived experience

The voices of women who are VET learners and teachers are rarely heard in VET policy forums. Our organisation

believes their voices should get into the debate. This is a key feminist issue and one of the reasons for WAVE's existence, so we asked ourselves how this paper could keep faith with our principles. The funds provided by ALNARC paid Jacinta Agostinelli to explore our questions (listed above) by writing the following account of three women learning literacy in Australia today, and her own experience of teaching them within the VET system.

### The learners

Lyn Black is 19. She comes to my CGEA (Certificates in General Education for Adults) class held twice a week at Glenroy Neighbourhood Learning Centre. The centre is an old factory and our class is in a back room with no windows. Last year Lyn and a pre-service teacher spent part of a semester break painting a window onto the wall. Now we have a room with a view.

Katy Lea at 54 is a published writer. She contributed to *Stories from the Broadmeadows Women's House* written by my creative writing group there. Broadmeadows Women's House is a women-only venue at the end of a quiet cul-de-sac and I had to get a special dispensation to bring my male pre-service teacher in last year. I am being humorous—my request was made more through courtesy than because there was an issue. Immersing a young male teacher of the future into a women-only environment and into the feminised occupation of teaching was a positive step. His biggest problem was that there were no bathroom facilities for him! Mona Al-Rostrum, a 44-year-old Muslim woman in my ESL literacy class, takes off her scarf once she's inside Broadmeadows Women's House. She didn't go to school in Lebanon and wants to learn English so she can understand the culture that is absorbing her two boys, but one class a week doesn't move her along fast enough. Her oldest son has just turned 16. Mona brings much laughter and energy to the class.

In the hour long interview I conducted with each of them to gather data for this paper, the three women talked about their lives in relation to their literacy. I used the questions listed at the beginning of this paper to shape the interviews, as well as questions that cropped up as we talked.

- Why are these women in my literacy classes?
- What life experiences led them here and what do they want from the classes?
- How do they define literacy and how does that definition affect my teaching and the outcomes?
- How does the system we work within extend or limit our aspirations?

Lyn describes literacy in terms of spelling, feeling good about herself, and being open to new ways of looking at life. She says of her mother, who left school early, 'She couldn't read and write big words, she couldn't spell, she didn't have the opportunity to read and write'. For Lyn, not having a large

vocabulary and not being able to spell are barriers to learning to read and write. Literacy is also about having the power to help others and helping others is a way to feel good. She says, 'If I can spell a word I can help out the other students. Helping someone means a great deal to me'. Literacy classes open her mind. She said, 'Coming here has opened up a lot of ways of thinking about things'. So the window on the wall is no accident.

reading and writing is life education, hearing about other people's lives, knowing I'm not alone

Katy uses the same metaphor. She says that the first creative writing class 'opened my eyes' and 'reading and writing is life education, hearing about other people's lives, knowing I'm not alone, an opening of the mind to other people'. Literacy is also learning about the basics. Like her mother, her education was curtailed by early pregnancies. Now she needs the opportunity to catch up on the basics before pursuing more vocational and advanced education. Katy also uses the metaphor of a journey when describing literacy. The creative writing class started Katy's journey to education. Literacy has helped Katy move on in life.

For Mona Al Rustrum, an ESL student, literacy is about understanding the English language and texts to maintain her relationship with her children. If she can understand the culture her children are growing up in she believes she can protect her family from the problems that many immigrant families face when their children live in two cultures. She says, 'I learn English because I have to know about my kids, I have to know the child's teacher, how he learns, how in the future he do something'. Her literacy helps Mona to understand her children's world.

For the learners themselves literacy is about having the skills to read, write and speak the texts of their culture so they can participate in it and not 'be a nobody' (Katy Lea). Learning to read and write brings an excitement, a sense of 'I can do it, I can now join in with life'. The student develops confidence and wants 'to get up early in the morning' (Lyn Black) and begins to open her mind to new ways of doing and seeing. Before coming to classes these women saw reading and writing as something they couldn't do, a secret they didn't get to know because of their life experiences.

We can't afford to ignore the importance of the students' own definition of literacy. It is primarily about learning to read and write in the dominant discourse of one's culture so one can participate in that culture. This is a simple definition that reduces the emphasis on other literacies such as visual, economic, emotional and technical literacies. It is also a view that supports the use of resources for general education. Presently, funding favours vocational education, but these women speak of the importance of the literacy class in getting them 'launched' (Katy Lea).

It is at this point that you might well ask: what issues in these women's lives have shaped their definition of literacy, and their decision to join a literacy class? What are their

aspirations for the future? Awareness of the issues faced by women, and awareness of their future aspirations, should influence the decisions of teachers and policy makers who work in the field of adult literacy.

Katy Lea had to care for herself and her two younger sisters when her mother left the family. She married just after finishing school. Although she excelled at learning she didn't reach her potential because of the burden of caring for younger sisters and her early marriage. Her husband was abusive and gambled and she was trapped in the marriage until her two children grew up. Katy developed depression and low self esteem. For months on end she didn't leave the house except to shop. An advertisement in a local paper for a writing class at the Broadmeadows Women's House drew her away from Bert Newton on daytime TV and she thought of the literature and Shakespeare prizes she'd won at school. In that first class she started writing and says, 'everything I buried for years and years came to the surface. It was a cathartic experience'. In the writing class Katy learnt the art and techniques of modern writing and is now doing the course in writing and editing at Swinburne University by distance education. She has been published in women's magazines. Her dream is to finish the writing course and to continue publishing stories.

For Katy the writing class was an opportunity to return to life. It was the beginning of her 'journey to education' and gave her confidence to 'get out of the house'. The fact that the class was in an all women environment, in a local neighbourhood house, 'a house not unlike the house she lives in' made it easier for her. Had the class been at the TAFE institute Katy might never had taken the first step on that journey. She says a TAFE institute would have intimidated her at a time when she needed nurturing and support.<sup>6</sup> She got that nurturing through the staff, the other women, and the comfort of the smaller women's house. Accessibility was important because Katy didn't have a car. Many women in her circumstances don't, she said.

What educators need to hear in Katy's story is the significance of the women-only nurturing environment where easily accessible, non-vocational literacy classes are offered. This is what women with low self esteem, who may also be coming out of an abusive marriage, need when they take the first steps in returning to education.

Lyn says her literacy was affected by emotional abuse and difficulties at school. She spent many nights as a child 'under the table in the local hotel while my mother partied'. Her alcoholic mother was only 16 when she had Lyn. Lyn repeated the cycle and had two aborted pregnancies at 16. She felt the teachers at school didn't care about her learning and, she says, refused to give her extra help when she asked for it. So she left school and home and used drugs to cope with life. She worked for three months in administration but lost her

job because she 'couldn't write properly and...couldn't spell the words I needed to take telephone messages'. Two years later Lyn took another chance at education and joined our reading and writing class. She wants a stable, interesting job where she can meet many different people.

an advertisement ...for a writing class at the Broadmeadows Women's House drew her away from Bert Newton on daytime TV

It is easy to relate Lyn's definition of literacy to her life experiences, especially those specific to being a woman. In the context of a community learning centre, with its supportive teachers and manager, Lyn has come to see literacy as opening her mind to new ways. Small mixed ability classes have restored her belief in herself as a learner, empowered her to join the one of the centre's committees and to use her initiative to implement change within the centre. Lyn's story illustrates how the context of the community-managed learning centre can give women a way back into education and life. Her involvement on the committee exemplifies how the literacy class can be a pathway to the equity of power between men and women that feminism calls for.

There was no education for girls where Mona Al Rustrum grew up on the border of Lebanon and Syria. As a Muslim woman she is more comfortable in all-women classes and is sometimes 'embarrassed' in male company. Because she didn't drive for many years the accessibility of the women's house was important to her, as was the attached childcare facility. Childcare is an issue for Mona and many other women who use the women's house. Onsite childcare is useful for women with a language other than English background who may find it difficult to access regular child care centres because of cultural preferences or problems with language. Economic reasons also prevent many women in Broadmeadows from using council and private childcare facilities. Occasional childcare is not usually subsidised in centres, but it is at the women's house, making it both affordable and convenient. It is also a positive for the children who might otherwise have limited opportunities for socialisation or for acquiring English.

I asked Mona where she would like to be five years from now. She replied that she wanted to be at home happily with her family and living in a peaceful world. The whole context of the women's house is integral to Mona's participation in literacy classes and to the realisation of her future aspirations.

These women learn in three different classes in two learning centres. All three classes have a reputation for being Raucous, and the creative writing class is described as Raunchy as well—this makes for five Rs, not three!

My own experience of the classes is that they are joyful. Planning the curriculum is not difficult, but it takes time, resources and reflection—both for the structured reflection I get from professional development and meetings with other teachers, and the habitual private reflection that happens

as I pack up at the end of the class and at odd moments in the business of family life and sessional teaching. Lessons can't be lifted from a textbook. They have to address the needs of particular learners like Lyn, Katy and Mona, including some that are specific to women.

### The teachers

So far this paper has focused on how three women learners view their literacy and what issues in their lives gave rise to that view. What of the women who teach in literacy, and their issues? I'm going to assume I am representative of women literacy teachers in many aspects. I am in my third year of teaching anything. I am probably atypical there, as most of the women I work with have been teaching for many years. I am 43 and teach on a sessional basis. I have a family and was out of the work force while my children were growing up. This means my partner's career has got, and still does get, precedence over mine. I sometimes find it difficult to reconcile my desire to advance my career as a teacher and with that of primary carer of my family, particularly in times of illness among family members.

I chose to teach literacy for three main reasons. First I believe that not all people are given an equal chance at literacy. There are some groups of people, disadvantaged through no fault of their own, who do not get the same chance to learn to read and write as others. When literacy is your ticket to the future and when our society measures a person's value by their level of literacy, the situation we have is unfair. As a literacy teacher I could do something about this inequity. Second, I enjoy nurturing people, as many women do. Lyn Black says that helping other people makes her feel good. It makes me feel good too. And third, I thought there would be plenty of opportunity for part-time work in community education, so I wouldn't feel I was abandoning my family altogether.

Sessional work is unstable because jobs can be terminated if funding or demand is reduced. I get paid only for the hours I teach, yet I know preparation for the class is as important as the teaching. There is no holiday or sick pay. Some teachers have to claim unemployment benefits during the long Christmas vacation. Because many teachers in community education are women and have to share themselves between family and work, there is little time, energy or focus left to spend on changing our conditions. I am pleased to say however that I am a union woman!

The busyness of our centre and the coming and going of teachers directly before and after classes gives us little time for informal discussion and reflection on teaching with other professionals in the field. The amount of nurturing required in an adult literacy class can be an issue too, so I think it is important to have clear boundaries in my role.

A literacy class is not the place for students to disclose their experiences in a therapeutic way. I believe it is rather a place where students can restore their self confidence and self esteem through positive learning experiences. The three students I interviewed are good examples of this view at work. However, it is crucial that I have an appreciation of how the students' past and present lives impact on their learning.

Sessional work is unstable because jobs can be terminated if funding or demand is reduced

My efficacy as a teacher of adult literacy is dependent on my understanding that most students have experienced social, emotional, sexual or physical abuse, or have mental health or learning problems which have impacted on their ability to learn. With the right sort of class environment and the right theoretical approaches, I believe students can overcome their barriers to some extent and improve their reading and writing. They discover as Lynne Kosky, our Minister for Education says, 'that they can do it'.<sup>7</sup>

There are two major aspects to my teaching. One is the confidence-building, nurturing role I have just described, which tends to be a more comfortable one for women than for men. This, as well as the low pay, demanding hours and lack of career structure explains why adult and vocational education is a female-dominated field. For this reason it is good to see our teacher training institutions encouraging young male pre-service teachers into adult education settings as part of their teacher training. It is even better to be able to give future male teachers the opportunity to teach in a women's venue where they are exposed to the realities that women grapple with daily, the issues of child care, domestic violence, isolation, low self esteem, and abuse in its varied forms.

The second aspect is the fact that I am there, first and foremost, to teach language. The three students I interviewed all expressed frustration with not knowing the mechanics of the primary language of their culture. The not knowing is a barrier to their full and rightful participation in the workforce and in the community. If I do not plan my curriculum around the language needs of my students I am not helping them to achieve the independence, as a learner and as a citizen, they crave for and deserve.

### The system

What systemic issues impact on women in literacy? Mention has already been made of structures for delivery so I will concentrate now on curriculum development, funding policies, certification and professional development.

Funding for literacy education in TAFE institutes and ACE is on the basis of student contact hours. In Victoria ACE agencies receive \$5.61 per student contact hour and are not funded for sufficient hours for many students to work successfully through the CGEA, especially if students are dealing with family life or personal matters. When the



women in my classes are dealing with issues that have affected their learning, that learning is going to be slow. It cannot be fast tracked.

The CGEA itself is a valuable framework. Grounded in genre theory, which developed from systemic functional linguistics, the reading and writing stream of the CGEA encompasses four broad text types. By planning curriculum around the four text types I can specifically teach how texts are put together, and in what contexts they can be used. The three women described here did not acquire this critical knowledge of language when they were at school. Genre theory is premised on the idea that until a person knows how and why the texts and discourses of their culture are constructed, they cannot fully participate in mainstream society. Unless I can teach these women the assumptions of genre theory, literacy events and discourses of power will remain inaccessible to them.

Lyn Black says she lost her job because she could not write phone messages or spell words specific to her employment. And Mona Al Rustrom couldn't say it more clearly for us—she wants to know the language of the culture her children are growing up in so she can keep track of them. She needs to know how the language works so she feels empowered in her role as a mother. Katy Lea learnt how to construct a narrative and how to adapt it to the purposes of women's magazines. I doubt any of these women will end up in executive positions of power (neither will I for that matter) so the purpose of literacy classes is not an idealistic one. The purpose of the literacy class is to give the women a knowledge of language that will realistically empower them at a personal and community level.

Because the women describe their literacy in terms of spelling and decoding and also perceive that their weaknesses are to do with decoding, I believe curriculum should support language learning at this level too. My belief is supported by the findings that many students in literacy classes, both male and female, have language processing difficulties which include difficulties with decoding, memory, organisation, spelling, punctuation and syntax. As a group these same students also have different learning strategies that conventional teaching does not always address.

The CGEA does not prescribe ways of teaching and assessing students' competence at this level, but assumes language processing skills will be taught anyway. Yet because language processing skills are foundational to successful reading and writing, there should be more emphasis on them in the certificate. For this reason also literacy should not be diluted by a flood of other literacies such as emotional, economic, democratic and visual literacies. As said in the introduction to this paper, these literacies can draw attention and resources away from the teaching of basic skills that students require when learning to read and write.

**the purpose of the literacy class is to give the women a knowledge of language that will realistically empower them**

However, critical literacy and computer technology skills are both intrinsic to participation in modern society. Lyn Black says, 'I must read everything or else I feel I'm cheated, or something like that. I just feel that I need to read it myself to know'. The feeling of being cheated or of not knowing what other people know is a strong one among students in a literacy class. And if you don't know or don't have the perception of those who generate written texts, you run the risk of being deceived. Women who have been vulnerable in other areas of their lives are likely to feel this particular vulnerability even more strongly. It is important therefore, that critical literacy is addressed in the classroom.

Computer technology is another powerful tool of the modern world that is not easily accessed by women like the three described here. Katy Lea turned up anxiously to her first computer class. She had barely set foot in non-domestic precincts for years, let alone gone near that symbol of advanced society—the computer. She understood that her competence with the computer was evidence that she was intelligent and could be literate and participate in mainstream society.

If technology is to be an integral part of the literacy class, and that is increasingly the case as flexible learning resources increase, then it must also be a part of the teacher's training. With the rate of change in technology, much of the training has to be picked up by professional development. Online learning is part of the future in the literacy classroom, and computer literacy is mandatory if women are to be freed from their marginal status. Teachers should therefore be encouraged by employers and policy makers to improve their technological skills.

Professional development, whether it is about technology or other aspects of teaching practice, is important; it keeps teachers in touch with change and encourages them to reflect on their methods. Much of the current funding for professional development goes towards moderation, the checking of standards between providers, rather than towards workshops and seminars about theory and practice. I find most professional development sessions stimulating and I return to the class with renewed energy, which then transfers on to my students.

Documenting the three women's and my own experiences of literacy was a task I anticipated with excitement. The women felt interested and honoured to take part in a study that called on them to express some of the innermost details of their lives. Katy Lea used her pen name to protect family still living. Lyn Black is a pseudonym. Mona Al Rustrom is happy for her real name to be used. Use of a person's name in conversation demonstrates trust and intimacy, so I think readers of this paper should feel honoured by her choice.

## Conclusion

Little has been written about women and literacy in Australia over the past 30 years although many in the field draw on the work of Pam Gilbert, Barbara Kamler, Jenny Horsman and others to inform their practice.<sup>8</sup> The 1996 ERIC data base<sup>9</sup> has a useful discussion of issues regarding women and literacy drawn from the work of Canadian, USA and Australian writers such as N.A. Carmack, S. Cornes, B. Flint-Coplan, N. Gilding, J. Horsman, M. Norton and S. Shore.

Susan Imel's ERIC data base summary of issues covers:

- the diversity of purposes in literacy programs for women, which can range through an unquestioning maintenance of the status quo to the promotion of critical literacy
- the debate about women-only classes—some argue that gender and ethnic inclusive curriculum will suffice, others that a necessarily different discourse takes place in women-only groups
- the particularly Australian interest in whether a perceived low value placed on adult literacy education is caused by the predominance of women as teachers in the field.

To sum up, our WAVE sub-group asserts that at least five fundamental conditions are necessary for Australian women literacy learners and teachers:

- 1 Women learners need serious and sustained learning opportunities to develop their powers of critical thinking through reading, writing and speaking English.
- 2 Women learners need a choice of settings including community-based agencies, TAFE institutes and women-only groups.
- 3 Women learners need particular content and texts that open new understandings and knowledge of the world they live in.
- 4 Women teachers, front line workers in one of the newest and toughest of all educational endeavours, crave for, and deserve, better terms and conditions.
- 5 Women teachers need regular paid professional development opportunities to reflect deeply on their work of generating the theory and practice of adult literacy education.

WAVE's take on feminism suggests that men need these conditions too, but that is another set of stories, from different voices, for a different time and place.

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## Notes

- 1 For more details about this discussion see [www.converse.com.au/News/2alnarc.htm](http://www.converse.com.au/News/2alnarc.htm)
- 2 Bradshaw, D., 1999, *Transforming lives, transforming communities*, p 49, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ACFE Board.
- 3 From the statement of purposes in WAVE's constitution.
- 4 Kirner, J, *The political leader: women and power*, <http://www.converse.com.au/Articles/1kirner.htm>
- 5 Kirner, J. & Rayner, M, *The women's power pocket book*, pp 58–60.
- 6 The authors believe a choice between ACE, TAFE and school settings is important for learners and should be supported through funding policies.
- 7 The Age, 16 February, 2002
- 8 For example, Kamler, B. 1994, *Lessons about language and gender*, Australian journal of language and literacy, vol. 17, no. 2, pp 129–38; and Gilbert, P. 1993, '(Sub)versions: using sexist language practice to explore critical literacy', *Australian journal of language and literacy*, vol. 17, no. 4, pp 323–332; and Horsman, J, 'The problem of illiteracy and the promise of literacy', in *Worlds of literacy*, Hamilton, M., Barton, D. & Ivanic, R (eds), Clevedon, Avon, England.
- 9 at <http://ericacve.org/docgen.asp?tbl=tia&ID=96>

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# Untangling the Web: online literacy for the Deaf and hard of hearing

by Fran O'Neill

**Most web surfers take their Internet literacy for granted, but for the Deaf and hard of hearing a text-heavy website can lead to confusion and misunderstandings.**

The Literacy Online for People who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing—through Sports, Arts and Recreation project was funded by a grant from the AccessAbility program of the Commonwealth Department of Communications Information Technology and the Arts (DoCITA), and conducted by the Faculty of Further Education at Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE (NMIT). It was conducted in conjunction with a parallel project: Literacy Online for People with Physical and Intellectual Disabilities, undertaken by Information and Telecommunications Needs Research (ITNR) at Monash University. This paper will outline the project for students who are Deaf and hard of hearing, but all three websites can be viewed at [www.elr.com.au/lol](http://www.elr.com.au/lol).

The aim of the project was to develop the literacy of people who are Deaf<sup>1</sup> and hard of hearing through the provision of a website which is structured for this purpose, but which also provides content based on the interests of users in the areas of sports, arts and recreation.

The primary language of Deaf people in Australia is Auslan, a visual language based on gestures and having very different conventions from those of English. Research undertaken by NMIT sought to test the feasibility of developing an online learning facility for Deaf people. Findings suggested that the greatest concern for Deaf users was that a high level of language skill is required to access most materials on the Web. Focus groups conducted as part of the Deaf Australia Online AccessAbility project supported this finding, and revealed concerns that most web sites are text-based, and access to online sources of information requires a high literacy level in the English language

This project sought to explore the literacy and web design issues involved in making online information more accessible and usable, and to establish a website that would assist people who are Deaf and hard of hearing to develop English literacy and to engage critically with the Internet.

More specifically, the key objectives of the Literacy Online for People who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing—through Sports, Arts and Recreation were to:

- investigate language and literacy issues and barriers to Internet access for the target group
- investigate best practice (in Australia and overseas) with regard to approaches to literacy development (traditional, visual/graphical, and online)

- examine areas of recreational interest of client groups and develop formats and appropriate interfaces which appeal in online environments
- examine options for the development of formats and design interfaces in accord with the World Wide Web (W3C) Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) guidelines as well as good design practice (for content, organisation, navigation and structure)
- develop both content and interfaces in conjunction with client groups and associated staff
- trial materials with client groups
- develop models of best practice for the design of websites which can aid traditional, visual/graphical and information literacy, at the same time as catering for the recreational interests of client groups
- pass the ownership of these websites to client groups, for ongoing development and maintenance.

## The target group

Students from the Centre of Excellence for Students who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing at NMIT participated in the project. The Centre of Excellence provides a state-wide service to advise and assist TAFE institutes to effectively support Deaf and hard of hearing students in mainstream courses. The Centre of Excellence also provides advice and expertise at the systems level on the needs of Deaf and hard of hearing students state-wide.

The initial sample consisted of a total of eight students. Although this sample is seemingly small, the work undertaken with each student was extremely thorough and individualised.

The group of students who participated in this project attend NMIT one day a week for a general education program which aims to develop students' skills, knowledge and understanding in the use of language, literacy, numeracy and learning technologies. This program is accredited under Certificate I in the Certificates in General Education for Adults (CGEA).

The broad aim of the general education program for students who are Deaf and hard of hearing is to provide students with broad based English language, literacy and numeracy classes. Content is generally negotiable and focuses around students' interests and previous knowledge. Where the teachers are not fluent in Auslan, an Auslan interpreter is always present. Most students attend the program to develop their English language

and literacy skills and attend this particular program because of the attraction of studying and learning with other Deaf people. The Centre of Excellence attracts students from all over Melbourne—from Geelong through to Lilydale and down to the Mornington Peninsula. There are no specific limits on the duration of the program and students negotiate their own learning needs and pathways, along with their entry and exit points, with teachers and the coordinator. A typical student would stay in this program for two to three years.

The students are all adults, ranging in age from 25 to 48. They come from a range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The majority are profoundly pre-lingually Deaf; a few have a lesser degree of hearing loss, but its impact has still adversely affected speech and language development. Students have a range of educational backgrounds with some having very limited formal schooling or having been educated through inappropriate teaching methodologies. For some students their schooling experiences were overseas and so they are not familiar with Australian sign language, Australian Deaf culture and more broadly with navigating pathways through the Australian VET sector.

### Conceptual frameworks and methodology

Three complementary approaches were used in this project. The first is an interpretivist approach to qualitative data collection. The second, informed by the tradition of action research, offers a research method based upon interactive collaboration between researchers, students, and teachers. The third arises around debates concerning critical social literacy, with their emphasis upon literacies as multiple means of navigating through a wide range of social practices.

The drawing on critical social literacy, action research and interpretivist/constructivist approaches for the Literacy Online research project has been possible because of the important affinities that they share. One affinity is that exponents of all three commonly see themselves as anti-positivist, rejecting the assertion that a value-free understanding of social relations is either possible or desirable. A second affinity is that there is the emphasis that each approach places upon the viewpoints provided by participants. A third affinity lies in the open ended nature of all three approaches to research—each is premised upon a concern to follow the threads of meaning as they emerge within the research process itself.

### Findings

Overall, the project has determined the importance of the design of websites which can make online information more accessible and usable for people who are Deaf and hard of hearing and also assist them to develop English literacy and to engage critically with the Internet.

### Literature review

Any sustained discussion of literacy development for Deaf people raises fundamental questions about educational

philosophies, learning strategies and the use of appropriate resources. Debate on each of these issues is wide ranging, particularly since the understanding of literacies is both enriched and challenged by the adoption of new forms of media. At the same time, the exploration of literature for this project has made it possible to draw a number of conclusions:

- that today's multiple literacies must be contextualised within the social practices of the people who use them if positive learning outcomes are to be achieved
- that online literacy means more than the transfer of traditional understandings from the print format to a new screen environment
- that the considered use of computers can make a positive contribution to the literacy development of learners who are Deaf and hard of hearing, as long as appropriate scaffolding is provided by educators and associated staff
- that content seeking to address the interests of learners can play a critical role in encouraging and enriching learners' efforts to develop their own critical appreciation of online resources
- that current notions of Web accessibility need to be broadened if the content of the Internet sites is to be of use to the needs of learners who are Deaf and hard of hearing.

### Recreational interests

The interviews conducted with both student participants and associated staff concerning Deaf people's recreational interests found that even though Deaf people's interests are as broad ranging as any cross sample of the Australian population, the targeted areas of interest—sport, art and recreation—were nevertheless pertinent to this group of Deaf learners. In addition to the identification of recreational interests, the issue of enhanced communication opportunities for people who are Deaf and hard of hearing using online technologies dominated in all feedback situations. Interest areas noted during the interviews included sport, TV shows and films, Deaf community sites, Disneyland, craft (for example spinning, folk art, and sewing), word games and learning how to search on the Internet.

### Initial assessment: literacy and computer readiness

Students were withdrawn from their classroom on an individual basis over a period of six weeks for this assessment. There were at least two project workers working with each student and an Auslan interpreter was present for each interview. Each assessment lasted for 50–60 minutes. These interviews took longer than the interviews with students in the ITNR parallel project, due in part to the fact that the assessment was presented in a second or other language (written English) and interpreted to and from Auslan.

The Awareness and Assessment Protocol (AAP) is a computerised assessment tool consisting of twelve tasks.



Figure 1

Figure 1 shows the home page of the AAP and the starting point for students. The arrows are links that take the student to the task. For each assessable task there is an instruction page and an opportunity for the student to practice the skill before the actual assessment begins. At the end of each assessable task the student is given three scores:

T time taken to complete the task

S raw score

R responses indicating which components were completed correctly and which incorrectly (1 = correct and 0 = incorrect)

Of tasks one to twelve (as seen in Figure 1) the following eight are assessed:

- 1 *Visual field* to assess a person's ability to read all parts of a computer screen.
- 2 *Touch accuracy* to assess a person's ability to touch or click on all parts of a computer screen.
- 3 *Visual discrimination* to assess a person's ability to make subtle visual distinctions on Web pages.
- 4 *Visual memory* to assess a person's short term visual memory as required for Web navigation.
- 5 *Reading single words* to assess reading and comprehension of single words.
- 6 *Reading sentences* to assess reading and comprehension of increasingly complex sentences.
- 7 *Reading paragraphs* to assess reading and comprehension of paragraphs and hypertext-like indexes.
- 8 *Reading hypertext* to assess reading and comprehension of more complex passages of text.

The AAP tool highlighted the need to contextualise English language and the fact that the use of English words in isolation often serves to disadvantage learners for whom Auslan is the first language. For example, when asked to choose the best

word to match the picture for the following task, (see Figure 2), five students scored an 'incorrect', choosing *shave* over *razor*. This highlights a difficulty for Deaf people when English words are written down without a context. Auslan is always contextualised and in the two instances of, for example, going shopping for a razor and having a *shave* in the morning, the same sign is used for both *razor* and *shave*. It is the grammar of Auslan and the context of language usage which tells the Deaf person whether the meaning indicates the object, *razor* or the associated action, *shave*.



Figure 2

In addition, the assessments highlighted that the use of any graphics to support English literacy learning for Deaf and hard of hearing students needs to convey as much motion as possible to adequately assist them in making meaning. When asked to choose the best sentence to match the picture in the following task (see Figure 3), four students scored an 'incorrect'.



Figure 3

In fact, one of these students told us that there was no correct sentence. When asked why, she responded that no one was waving their arms.

#### Initial interviews

Seven of the sample group of eight Deaf students were interviewed about their experience with, and opinion of, computers and the World Wide Web. Students had Internet

access during this interview and those who had experience with it were asked to demonstrate their skill and knowledge by going to sites they use regularly. Students who did not have Internet experience or confidence were supported by the project team who showed them sites and taught them some basic navigation skills, including how to use a search engine.

During the interview observations were made about each student's ease and familiarity with the keyboard and mouse, Internet usage, email and chat, downloading and printing. In addition their opinions were sought on the sites they visited and the Internet in general.

Students commented that the heavy text content and big words made it difficult to understand a lot of the information. For some, limits in their vocabulary of English words were a disadvantage. For example, one student looking for sites to do with food or cooking did not know the word 'culinary' that would link her there. For others the encounter with Internet jargon was overwhelming and often frustrating.

Most students found the use of small fonts a disadvantage and most commented that cluttered and busy web page layout made reading the page very difficult. Flashing icons and moving text were difficult for nearly all students. Most were frustrated by a slow connection and unsure of how long to wait or how to read the screen to know that the page was loading.

Of those new to the Internet, some had trouble using the browser. For example, some were not aware of the need to scroll or the purpose of the back button and some had problems coordinating mouse and cursor. Another concern for students was making spelling mistakes when trying to do searches. A few students also had concerns about protecting their privacy on the Internet.

In summary, it was found that the complexity of language and page design of most websites was a deterrent to most of this group of Deaf students. If the students, particularly those new to the Internet, were going to be engaged, then their entry into the World Wide Web needed a smooth transition that was compatible with their knowledge and comfort with English language and literacy.

### Design interfaces

In relation to website design, findings showed a need to emphasise easy access to appropriate online resources. Web sites relevant to this group of Deaf students need to:

- be user-friendly—a good example is [www.deafchat.com](http://www.deafchat.com)
- facilitate local knowledge and communication with others
- use graphics to support text
- build upon peer group methods of learning
- be identifiable as Deaf sites
- 'sit above the fold'
- have a consistent style throughout the site
- ensure the font used is of a size that would accommodate ease of reading.

### Content and interfaces

A detailed and careful process of trial and error took place, using student and staff feedback as key gauges for the initial development, ongoing modification and improvement of the website (see Figure 4).

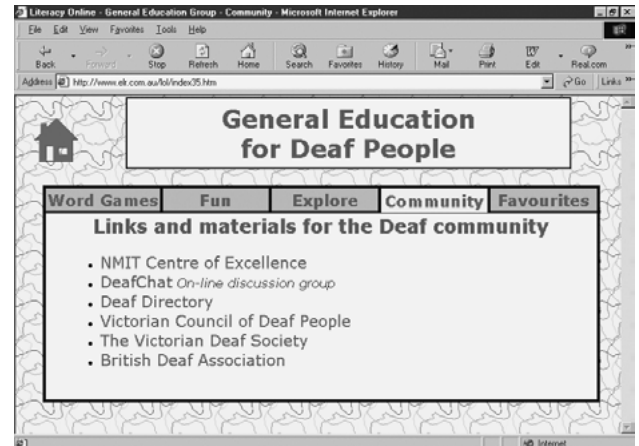


Figure 4

Each page within the website developed for this group of Deaf students sits 'above the fold' so that the contents of the whole page are accessible on a standard size screen at first glance, without any need for scrolling. There is a consistent style throughout the site, with the same white rectangle and orange buttons arranged on a speckled yellow background. The font used is a good size and easy to read, while the layout of the text itself is uncluttered.

The home page of the website shows two Deaf people raising their hands in greeting. Set on a yellow speckled background, the main area of the page is a white rectangle, with a row of orange buttons running along its top. Clicking on each of the orange buttons takes the user to a different part of the site. The categories used for the organisation of this are: word games, fun, explore, community and favourites. Of these, the community link has proved the most popular as it takes the user to a range of sites developed for and by Deaf people and organisations (see Figure 5).

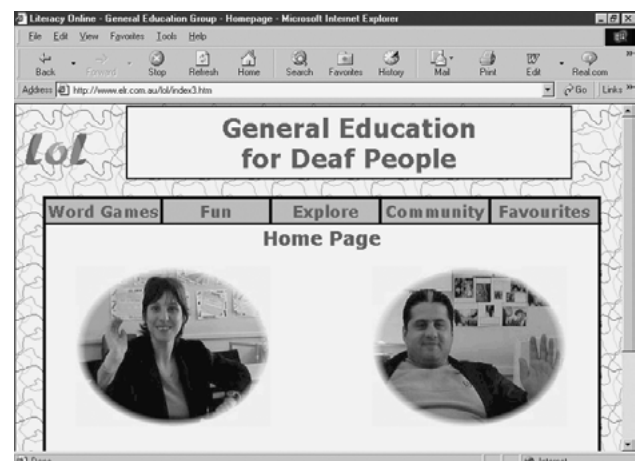


Figure 5

### Models of best practice

The websites developed in this project offer a range of exemplars relevant to users with varied confidence in the comprehension of English language materials. It is important to emphasise the term 'range' in this context. Students' needs and experience varied considerably within the group of learners with whom the research team conducted this project. As a consequence, it may well be that individual members of this particular target group will derive greater benefit from one or more of the other models developed in the project. It is also envisaged that all learners of English language and literacy would benefit from some aspect of these websites.

What is equally important to emphasise as another key finding of the project is that there is no technological fix, quick or otherwise, when seeking to support learners in their efforts to improve their online literacy. Similarly there can be no substitute for the supportive learning environment provided by dedicated educators and associated support staff.

The project's findings have also demonstrated that much can be done in terms of formats and design interfaces that facilitate such a learning environment, just as content that seeks to address learners' interests can play a crucial role in encouraging and enriching participants' efforts to develop their own critical appreciation of online resources.

**Fran O'Neill is a program coordinator in the Faculty of Further Education at NMIT. Currently she coordinates professional development and the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning trial site project in the faculty. Fran is also co-president of VALBEC.**

### Note

- 1 This report follows the accepted norm of capitalisation of Deaf to indicate those people who use a sign language and identify as members of a Deaf community (Woodward 1972; Power 1992; Carty 1993; Ozolins & Bridge 1999).

### ...continued from page 36

loved it! The next play, *I Want a Job*, came from a class of long-term unemployed who lived on the Fitzroy Housing Estate. They simply talked about their past jobs—there were soldiers, farmers and fishing net repairers who described their long journey through the maze of Centrelink, the case manager interview, the TAFE course, the job interview and the job! The text was very simple, funny and based on stories I'd heard in class. Three years later, students around the traps are still singing the song that went with that play—'I want a job, job, job, job, job'.

When the Aboriginal people turned their back on Howard at the reconciliation conference in the late 90's, a group of Hmong women I was teaching at Fitzroy Learning Network showed a strong interest in the land connection/dispossession issue. I suddenly saw the connection that many refugees have with Aboriginal people and their experience of war and genocide. I decided it was time for us to hear these stories and for people who have just come to our country to have an insight into our untold history.

This led to the play *I Came Without my Mother's Hand* where

a group of refugees and an Aboriginal actor told stories of the homes they had left, the wars they had escaped from, and their experiences of their new lives here. It was nostalgic, sad, and at times hilarious. We took this play to AMES centres and TAFE colleges across Melbourne. It was very successful and we performed an extra season due to popular demand! We were invited to do a short season at La Mama Courthouse Theatre for mainstream audiences.

In our second season, during the 2001 crisis with asylum seekers, we performed for the Refugee Action Collective and the Fitzroy Learning Network. Both are organisations that work with temporary protection visa (TPV) holders. This experience generated the idea to tell the stories of TPV holders. So a group of us, including director Robin Laurie and writer Arnold Zable, are using an Australia Council grant to write a new play called *Kan Yama Kan* (Arabic for 'once upon a time'). The asylum seekers will be performing this play with a professional actor (Alice Garner from *Seachange* and *Secret Life of Us*). The play pays tribute to the rich ancient cultures of the new arrivals. Kavisha Mazzella is the musical director and she is leading the Boat People Choir with Dursan Acar, a very talented Kurdish singer and musician.

## Embracing the differences: a lateral approach to literacy

Michael Chalk followed up on Rob McCormack's article—*Revisiting the past: a rhetorical approach to language and literature education*—which appeared in the autumn edition of *Fine Print*.

**Rob, thanks for your article outlining your new rhetorical approach. I'm sure readers were delighted to learn a bit about what you've been up to in the Top End. I imagine that working in the Northern Territory with indigenous learners is hugely different from working in Victoria with non-indigenous learners? Could you tell us about your experience of this difference?**

I am sorry, but it would take a massive tome to even begin to describe about my experience of the similarities and differences. That is, of course, if I could even find the words to articulate this experience.

All I can say here is: the experience of working in the Northern Territory with indigenous learners has had a profound impact on me. I feel both deeply 'at home' up here; but also 'deeply alien'. This double consciousness is unnerving but addictive.

On the other hand, there is a strong continuity for me. I feel I am pursuing the same educational work as in Footscray with the language development centre team. I am still trying to be faithful to the values of second-chance education and its commitment to social justice; I am still working pedagogically in the medium of language as a powerful media of educative meaning-making. However, I have learnt to value difference more deeply—especially differences of language and culture. I have also given up on literacy as a fundamental concept. It seems irretrievably ingrained with the simplistic values and judgments of modernity. So, I have moved more towards speech and performance. If I could have my life again, I would study drama and performance!

I should say: there were people around me in ALBE in the late 80s—early 90s trying to teach me both these lessons. But I'm a slow learner, I'm afraid.

**You're not thrilled about the state of play with regard to the current language and literacy frameworks. Do you or your colleagues still work with either the CGEA or the NRS? Is there a way to use these competency-based frameworks without radically damaging the teaching and learning process?**

No! I don't work with them. Others do. Personally I find that my own curriculum construction processes are very intuitive and subjective. And I am too old to try to fit them into a protean grid devised in order to generate transparent assessment processes rather than guide deep teaching/learning experiences. As you may know, I was involved (in the background) helping to generate many of the categories underpinning both the CGEA and the NRS, but more and more I felt that what I was putting up as

'tools for educators to think with' about the teaching/learning process were being twisted into 'tools for disciplining practice and sidelining reflective thinking'.

In my recent PhD I devoted a chapter to Kant's formulation of the difference between determinative judgements and reflective judgements (in his *Critique of Judgment*). He argues that whereas determinant judgements are based on knowledge and use universal criteria, conditions and thresholds (levels, performance criteria, etc), reflective judgements are quite different. Reflective judgements have to rely on a feel for things. They are intuitive, based on experience, hard to put into words or teach, and rely on a deep experience that is attuned to notice subtle analogies, similarities and resemblances. I believe that a true profession relies primarily on these reflective judgments and their appraisals, not determinant judgements. Unfortunately, I am not convinced that the policy makers of the 90s ever seriously envisaged ALBE as a professional field for the exercise, exploration and tactful transmission of the mostly tacit reflective judgements and appraisals at work in 'second-chance' pedagogy.

**I know you've been interested in rhetoric for a number of years. When and how did you first develop your interest?**

It's strange really! I was trained in philosophy which is the mortal enemy of rhetoric. Western culture could almost be written as an unending struggle between philosophy as a practice dedicated to the purity of a single universal truth, and rhetoric as a practice dedicated to the messy unity of a local community called into oneness by the passion, emotion and local arguments of public speech.

Of course, like others of my generation—the 60s generation—I was deeply infected with a sense of politics as participatory action and was indelibly marked by the experience of 'people power' created in street marches and demonstrations. Unlike many others of my generation, I was less interested in the long march through the institutions, a political process epitomised by the union movement and public policy process focused on the formulation of legislation, regulations and the institutionalisation of procedures.

So, in this deep sense I was always more committed, without realising it, to the rhetoric of action and speech over against the power of the written text as law and regulation.

Two things gelled this unconscious sympathy into a serious and conscious inquiry into the historic tradition of rhetorical



theory and pedagogy. One, working with indigenous students, I wanted to be able to find a pedagogical framing that went both ways in its valuing of English and western culture and indigenous languages, cultures, experiences and lives. I found this in a performatively-oriented study and enactment of a stylised public speaking in which students are able to give voice, give witness to their hopes and fears, their pains and joys to and for each other and enabled them to 'call' one another to take up the work of the future together. Moreover, many indigenous students have very poor English literacy skills—often they did not survive primary schooling and (in the NT) were denied secondary schooling. By focusing on speech and the speech community, rhetoric provides a more tangible and meaningful context for learning the deliberate and formal grammars, lexis and discourses of the institutions of power/knowledge and governance, language features usually learnt through written text. Thus we reverse the ordering. Instead of speaking in order to write, our students read and write in order to craft a speech. In this way they learn to read and write better without being subjected to the usual humiliations and alienation of written English literacy.

Secondly, I wrote a PhD in which I traced forms of practical education back to Aristotle and the Sophist's initial practice and theorisation of a domain of public democratic praxis. What I discovered was that the study and practice of rhetoric was integral to this experience and to the pedagogic formation of persons as participatory citizens of this public sphere. This discovery was both a surprise and pleasurable recognition because it reinforced my longstanding (ABE) commitment to language education as a powerful educative space for working with second-chance students.

**Does the rhetorical focus on 'cultivating responsive and responsible speech that addresses the specific matters at issue in debatable and contested situations' mean that your attention is mainly on the argumentative and persuasive texts emerging from issues-based situations? If so, how do you manage to keep the group dynamics friendly, while the focus is on argument?**

No. I don't focus on the argumentative at all. In fact, the two courses we have constructed so far (in what will eventually be a 3–4 year sequence) do not involve any arguing at all. Unfortunately, because rhetoric is no longer widely known, most language teachers identify rhetoric with argument. But, historically there were three kinds of rhetoric: *forensic rhetoric*, which is courtroom argument; *deliberative rhetoric*, which is persuasive speech aimed at bringing everyone together in the same understanding of what to do; and *epideictic rhetoric*, which is the ceremonial discourse used at funerals and other public events to praise the people, gods or things valued by the assembled community.

In these two courses we have framed the rhetorical occasion forming the motivation for students' public speeches as epideictic. Thus they affirm and praise the values, aspects and persons that give meaning to their life-worlds and affirm them as values to be remembered, renewed, enacted and projected into the future for coming generations of indigenous peoples.

Each student prepares a speech of praise on a public value of their own choosing. So, we don't get into argument at all.

However, when we eventually move on to develop the next set of units in this course, we will be exploring forensic rhetoric and so will have to get into argument. I have the same questions about this as you: on the one hand, I know that the defining motif of traditional European rhetoric is that there are always two sides and that both sides should get their say against each other, whereas nowadays, on the other, we want to evade conflict and disagreement. Hopefully I might have something to say on this in a few years time.

**Your program retains the relevance and engagement of whole language education, the Freirian concern for social action and the explicit focus of the genre approach. When examining a text, would you use a similar method as the genre approach—namely examining and analysing a textual model for its explicit features, and is there a difference?**

There are two main differences between the genre approach and a rhetorical approach. One is that the rhetorical approach has a much stronger sense of performance, risk and utterance. Genre can degenerate into a fairly mindless enactment of text-types with very little sense that these text-types come to life in a real social situation, as it were, in a situation of speech between players—even though the medium of communication may be writing. Rhetoric puts meaning-making and text-making back in its interactive, social, speechy context.

The other difference is that the kinds of textual features picked out for study, analysis and imitation by rhetoric are much more powerful and ring strongly in the ear. This is because most of them are deviations from the norms of both casual conversation and modern prose. Rhetorical figures (rhetorical text patterns) are, if you like, deliberate exaggerations of language for impact. Rhetoric gains its power by deviating from the proper way. Students love it. They also hear and see it all around them in the media, adverts, in politician's sound bites and so on. Our students can recognise an 'anaphoric isocolon' a mile off! They can use them fluently, no matter how well they speak English!

**In practice, how exactly do you prevent rhetoric from degenerating into a 'decontextualised rote training in timeless generic formats and standard formulas', as you say the genre approach often does?**

It would take too long to say! Maybe what I have already said can give you some sense of the energy of these workshops. We have 100-plus students from all over Australia thrust together, working in teams, for a fortnight. Each day they learn a new rhetorical figure and perform it for other students. By the final day students are comfortable standing up and speaking with a microphone before a large audience. On the final day of the workshop there is a march around the campus where students display all the artwork, songs and dances they have created to 'praise' their public values, and then they each give their speech before a large audience.

I'm sorry but in line with what I was saying about Kant's concept of reflective judgment, it is very hard to describe easily all the judgments that have gone into creating this pedagogic event. It took about 750 pages to describe the Return to Study course that Geri Pancini and I ran at Footscray TAFE; this one would take even more!

**Does rhetoric sit comfortably within a systemic-functional approach to linguistics? If not, what linguistic frameworks underpin your methods?**

Halliday has always described himself as inheriting the tradition of rhetoric, rather than the tradition of philosophy or logic or grammar. So, in terms of the three traditional arts of language—dialectic, poetic and rhetoric, Halliday sees himself as inheriting the rhetorical. That is true, I think. And I still find it inspiring to read Halliday himself. However, once his ideas are mediated through to the curriculum text, the ideas of systemic-functional linguistics have usually lost the freshness and subtlety that Halliday imbues them with, and they have been transmuted into the determinant concepts of applied linguistics. Also, as I pointed out earlier, rhetoric picks out more interesting and powerful text features than modern linguistics generally. This is because rhetoric is concentrating on what gives something that extra 'umph', whereas linguistics has to account for everything ...and can get bogged down.

So, I must admit I spend more time reading Quintilian, Hermogenes and Cicero these days and trying to figure out how what they have to say about language can be put to use today. I even use their technical terms with students. So, we study isocolons, antithesis, epistrophe, anaphora and such like.

**Again, looking at the practical side of things, do students make presentations and speeches in class, to practise their persuasive skills? How do you manage processes such as group work and feedback, either from peers or the educator?**

Students work in teams, using a carefully written workbook. They study, practice and perform 'a figure a day'. At the end of each day all 100 or so assemble and each team performs its best 'figures' for the rest of the class. They are wonderfully witty, humorous, serious and sentimental...the whole gamut! At the end of the two weeks, to their amazement, when all the rhetorical figures are added together they constitute a holistic speech, a speech that they feel they can stand strongly behind and utter with conviction and power. It is very emotional! Teams are responsible for the success of all their members. They manage themselves as a team, assisted by some low keyed support from indigenous tutors.

**For someone with no knowledge of indigenous languages, could you touch on the topic of indigenous rhetorics, and how they might differ from European ones?**

I don't know. Of course there may be a great variety among indigenous rhetorics. Samoan or Maori rhetoric may be quite different from Australian indigenous rhetorics. Indigenous people who have absorbed Christian rhetorics may be different

from peoples who have resisted the missions or experienced more benign missionaries. And so on.

In a way, I feel this is none of my business. I feel that my job is to study my own rhetorical culture and bring it into the common ground where it meets other rhetorics.

Perhaps I could just say this: my sense is that Australian indigenous peoples have always valued difference. They have never attempted to conquer or enslave one another in the way other cultures do. So, I imagine their rhetorics will somehow embody this respect for the difference of 'the other'. Probably it will be more a matter of negotiation and mediation, not just argumentation and efforts to coerce through proof. I would love to know, but I don't think it is my place to do the finding out.

**Finally, who was responsible for the progymnasmata?**

The progymnasmata is the ancient equivalent of genre pedagogy. It was the sequence of genres taught leading up to being able to speak in public. I don't think it was actually invented by any one person. Certainly, by Quintilian's time (circa 35–95 AD), it had been formulated and used as a curriculum structure for what we would nowadays call secondary school for a couple of centuries. It continued through the Byzantine Empire (where the most detailed descriptions are found) and continued through the Renaissance and right up to the eighteenth century.

I think it would be fair to say that there are three main curriculum regions in ancient rhetoric: the *progymnasmata*, which is a scaffolded process for leading students into the full genres of rhetoric through a set of smaller and simpler building blocks (mini-genres); *status theory*, which is the study of how to argue; and *figures*, which is the study of how to use rhetorical figures to increase the impact of your discourse.

So far I have not really looked at the first two, progymnasmata and status theory: I have only dipped lightly into the last region, rhetorical figures. Over the next couple of years I am hoping to get into status theory as a different approach to argument, one that does not fall back on the boring old traditions of critical thinking and clear thinking which come from the philosophy camp.

I am also keen to think through what a modern progymnasmata might be for second-chance students, especially indigenous adults and young adults.

**Thanks again Rob McCormack—we look forward to learning more about the program—and the research you're planning.**

Pleasure!

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# Making connexions: a look at English programs for at-risk youth

by Cate Thompson and Karen Dymke

**Australia offers better training options for young people than England, according to the authors, but these are limited by ad-hoc and short-term funding arrangements, as well as uncoordinated infrastructure for program development and further support. In England, the Connexions Service delivers realistic training and essential support and is supported by government funding to ensure a professional, consolidated and cohesive service.**

Teachers who worked in the language and literacy field seeking a respite from managing difficult behaviour in the school classroom got something of a shock about five years ago. An early trickle turned into a steady stream of students accessing literacy programs—students who came to be labelled youth at risk. Australia-wide, the needs of these young people demanded to be addressed. Furthermore, these young people who were finding their way to our programs were just the thin edge of the wedge. Not in school, employment or training, these young people have—in Brisbane alone—been referred to as ‘the lost 10,000’.

Often disadvantaged and generally considerably disaffected, these young people have posed significant difficulties for programs. Integration into existing classes is often beset with issues for other mature students. Separate programming is often difficult to fund. If feasible, committed youth literacy programs can be very difficult to manage.

It was with these experiences and issues in mind, from both TAFE and ACE perspectives, that we sought to look further afield at other experiences and ideas on how to handle this new and challenging situation. A travelling scholarship from the Office of Employment, Training and Tertiary Education offered that opportunity.

The intention of the scholarship was to look at the procedures, strategies and resources the British Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) had put in place to manage educationally disadvantaged and disaffected young people. In particular, the scholarship investigated the role of Connexions Services for youth.

At the time of our visit, Connexions Services was a newly established organisation designed to offer a full range of services and programs to young people. We visited a range of youth education and training programs for young at-risk learners (from one-on-one intensive personal development programs, to groups in both training and work-based settings).

We found that there were very strong similarities between the main issues associated with young at-risk learners in England and Australia—issues such as overcoming barriers, retention rates, relevant curriculum, poverty and drug problems.

However, there were two aspects that stood out as being very different:

- 1 The first was that Australia is far more advanced in its use of online learning and technology development, resources and learning strategies. There was little that could be brought back to enhance what was already on offer to our young at-risk Australian learners.
- 2 The second difference, and one that has made a positive impact on enhancing the opportunities of young at-risk learners in the UK, is the commitment the Blair Government has made to ensuring these young people have improved lifelong opportunities. This commitment was introduced in 1999 via a British Government White Paper, which resulted in the introduction of the Social Inclusion Policy. This policy set in place procedures, strategies and funding to ensure that every young person in England would be given the opportunity to gain a quality start in life.

The practical outcome was the establishment of a youth service known as the Connexions Service.

## What is Connexions?

The Connexions Service is a radical universal guidance and support service for young people. It is designed to ensure that all English people between 13 and 19 have the necessary support to participate in both formal and informal learning. It further aims to help them achieve their full potential, recognising that the needs of individuals differ and vary over time.

Connexions aims to offer a range of services to young people—from straightforward career guidance to intensive one-on-one support for those most at risk of not engaging in education or training. Its ultimate aim is to ensure all young people up to the age of 18 are in education, or work-based training that ultimately leads to long-term skilled employment that takes them beyond 19 years of age.

Connexions, while still in its infancy, is designed to bring together the full range of services and support that young people need in order to initially engage, and to sustain this

engagement over time. Fundamental to the service is the recognition that government departments cannot assist young disadvantaged people in isolation from other organisations. Rather, as clearly stated by Tony Blair, it must be done 'jointly between our Departments and in partnership with external groups such as police, social service, health services, schools, local communities, employers and young people themselves' (Tony Blair, Centrepoint London 16 December 1999).

### How does the Connexions Service work?

The basis of the Connexions Service has been built around the Careers Guidance Services model in the UK. Careers guidance has long been an established part of the English education system, with careers guidance officers accessible to all students in government schools. Connexions replaces this careers service. It provides support for young people by bringing together careers advisers, youth workers and other professionals, such as private and not-for-profit service companies, youth services, youth offending teams, education welfare services, learning mentors and social services, into one body in order to give young people a coordinated approach.

This streamlining of all youth services into one point of contact avoids the duplication of services and creates a situation where a young person, working with a personal adviser (PA), is less likely get lost or slip between the cracks.

It is anticipated that via the Connexions Service, every young person will have a PA who will provide support and guidance in a range of areas—giving them contact with one person who can help them with a range of issues affecting their lives, including educational opportunities.

Connexions looks at three priority groups of young people:

- Priority 1—Ten per cent will require intensive assistance for young people who are usually outside the education system.
- Priority 2—Twenty per cent will require significant assistance that provides in-depth guidance for those at risk of disengaging (either recently dropped out of assistance or at risk of dropping out).
- Priority 3—Seventy per cent will only require information and advice on careers/learning/employment choices with minimum levels of intervention (similar to the assistance they would normally receive from career guidance).

The first task for Connexions is to contact every young person pre- or post-16 who is not in education, employment or training. Each person is then assigned a PA who will work closely with them to provide whatever help is required and assist them to overcome barriers.

### The personal adviser

The role of the personal adviser (PA) is fundamental to the successful workings of the Connexions Service. A PA works with a young person on a whole range of issues.

The Connexions Service firstly identifies a youth at-risk. The main source of information is the school register in each local learning and skills council. Students whose records show, for example, school absenteeism, school exclusions, family difficulties, would be followed up. Other avenues may include health agency referrals and also on-the-street contact from PAs specifically assigned to high-risk localities.

Once identified as at-risk, the young person is assigned a PA, who can work with them. Often the connection to education and training comes after some of the issues have been identified and the young person has received assistance in finding accommodation, in organising social service arrangements, or with health and other issues.

The PA doesn't only identify the young person's barriers to learning but also actively puts in place strategies to assist the young person overcome these barriers. The PA then coordinates, supports and follows up the outcomes of this assistance.

Once the barriers are being managed or overcome, the PA can then place the young person in a relevant training program. The PA may accompany them to the program, follow up with regular visits or telephone calls to see how they are settling in and continue to assist them with issues/problems as they arise. This assistance plays a significant part in helping the young person to stay in the program. The PA also ensures that qualified and trained staff are addressing the issues and this allows more time for teaching/training staff to actually do more of the jobs they are trained for.

Once the PA has worked with the young person and identified their barriers to learning, they can then place them into a work-based or literacy program, or a program that would meet their needs. All programs are designed to assist the student to achieve the skills and confidence to be ready to undertake one of the three main options: work-based training, programs at Colleges of Further Education (equivalent of TAFE) or resumption of secondary schooling.

### Educational options

While the Connexions Service is designed to cater for all young people aged 13–19, there is a definite emphasis on identifying and then assisting those students most at risk. It has been recognized that there is a big gap in programs that cater for this specific group. Prior to the implementation of Connexions, the English education system presented few alternative programs for their young people.

The aim of Connexions is to ensure all young people in England complete one of the above three main options, the minimum being a Level 2 in Work-based Training. However, Connexions also recognizes that not all young people are ready to access these services. Connexions are developing alternative programs for this particular group of young people. We visited two of these programs—Life Skills and Learning Gateway.

## Life skills

The Life Skills option allows a flexible, tailor-made package of activities and support to be put together to meet the identified needs of the young person. The aim of Life Skills is to improve motivation and confidence, develop key skills and personal effectiveness skills and provide different work and learning opportunities.

There is a common core of basic and key skill development, vocational preparation and personal development. The needs and priorities of each individual determine the balance between these elements. Programs are arranged in manageable sequences of activity and units of learning with the end point of each clearly in sight. Progress is frequently reviewed so those learners can see what has to be done to remain on target.

Examples of these programs include:

- intensive, individual support programs such as, Moving Into The World of Work
- drop-in style centres such as, St Chad's Youth Access Investment Projects
- street contact teams for totally disengaged young people such as the Darnell Youth Centre
- Stepping Stone Programs run in small groups such as Oldham Kick Start pre-training, with an emphasis on Life Skills
- in-schools programs for potential at-risk students that offer alternative programs via workplace or training organisations
- full-time programs that focus on combining life skills and work-based learning with employment outcomes.

## The Learning Gateway

The Learning Gateway targets those 16–18-year-olds that are vulnerable at this transition phase. The priority is those who are disengaged from learning, but the Learning Gateway also aims to help those who are in danger of dropping out of learning because they lack the right skills, qualifications or attitudes, or because they face significant personal and social obstacles.

Young people in the target group may be disaffected by attitude, for example as a result of school exclusion, long-term truancy or low levels of school achievement, or disadvantaged by circumstances or characteristics such as homelessness, health problems, care history, family difficulties or offending behaviour.

The Learning Gateway is delivered jointly by Connexions/Careers Services and Local Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs), but a multi-agency approach is seen to be vital, with local implementation plans agreed on by all partners. The three most important and distinctive features of the Learning Gateway are:

- 1 Personal advisers are perhaps the single most important feature of the Learning Gateway, providing seamless

support for an individual. They provide help on a caseworker basis, including initial assessment, guidance, planning, review and support. The first requirement of the PA is to get alongside the young person and quickly build a relationship of trust.

- 2 Front End Assessment provides guidance and planning and covers different aspects of the young person's development—not simply further education, training or employment. It includes social welfare, health and, where necessary, criminal justice. A thorough client-centred assessment process is an essential component of the Learning Gateway.
- 3 The One-Stop Shop model exemplifies an example of this integrated approach. The One-Stop Shop centres are jointly funded by Connexions, health services and youth services. The centre visited in Coventry records up to 50–60 visits a day from young people. The aim of the provision is to review, help and support, giving guidelines to young people for action.

Developed in consultation with young people, services include access to computers, advice and referrals for education, support, employment, leisure and community activities. In addition to these services, there is free access to doctors and psychologists, support and information on health issues (drugs, alcohol, sexual health) and information on and access to help with housing and finances.

## Outreach

Those young people classified as Priority 1 would, however, be highly unlikely to find their way into such a centre. It is for these young people that provisions, such as the Darnell Youth Centre in Sheffield, have been established. This is an area strongly affected by the closing down of key industries and evidenced by generational unemployment and poverty. Most work with the young people is on an outreach basis, as they are hesitant to leave their own territory. The prevalent issues include glorified attitudes to crime, lack of direction and long-term disengagement. The young people and their issues drive the whole community.

The approach of the PAs is to go out to where young people are, rather than wait for them to come in for assistance. Advocacy, persistence and patience mark their work, with the development of trust as a key goal. A week prior to our visit, a petrol bomb had been thrown into the centre in retaliation for a perceived betrayal of trust when the police had made an investigative visit.

The outcomes for programs such as these are difficult to measure on the norms of standardisation, yet the work is imperative in countering the slippery road to despair.

The project at St Chad's Youth Access, in Coventry, was another example of a successful partnership. It was initiated following an audit of the area looking at crime and poverty. Funded by Youth Justice, Crime Concern and Corrections

Services, it is a drop-in centre for disaffected young people who are not attending school for a variety of reasons. The young people volunteer to attend and any attendance is acknowledged as legitimate school attendance. With a focus on providing mentors and individual tuition, it has seen a ten per cent drop in the crime rate in the area since it began. As many of the young people are identified as persistent offenders, developing positive relationships with the police has been a goal, with members of the force attending for six hours a week by joining in activities and dropping in to chat.

### Connexions in local government

The service is delivered through a central national unit run under the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE). Local Connexions partnerships are formed with a CEO managing the unit but working closely with members. These members are usually prominent people in the community, for example local management committee organisations, employers, statutory organisations, youth offending teams and young people themselves.

Our research revealed that the coming together of a number of different agencies and, therefore, cultures, was a process that required considerable negotiation and discussion. Although agencies have a common goal, they often have different ways of going about dealing with the processes and issues. As this is also a challenge we have experienced, it was encouraging to learn that it was a process that was assured was worth persevering with for the long-term benefits.

### Conclusion

Connexions is in its infancy and has yet to make a dramatic impact on the lives of all young English people. However, the whole thrust of the service is to ensure all young people receive the assistance they need to enable them to train for long-term employment.

The Connexions Service recognises the need to support marginalised young people. This creates the basis of a very positive and practical approach to managing these young people. Most importantly, with this recognition comes adequate funding. This funding is not just for training programs but also for the personnel necessary to assist at-risk young people overcome the many barriers that otherwise prevent them engaging in training that can lead to sustainable employment.

The introduction of PAs into the Connexions Service has been thorough and professional. PAs are being recruited from existing professional bodies of the career guidance officers, and youth workers who are already familiar with many of the job demands. Further to this, all PAs are required to undertake further training via a diploma qualification, ensuring an up-to-date professional service.

The Connexions Service recognises that more time needs to be put into creating an education system that meets the wide

and diverse needs of young people, especially those not engaged in learning. Hence the introduction of pilot programs such as Life Skills and Learning Gateway. These are realistically funded with some student/teacher ratios as low as 1:1 (for the most difficult cases) then moving onto smaller groups of four or five, with the majority of programs having six to eight students.

General observations were that the actual system the Connexions Service has developed is sound, realistic and successful. A second stage that is currently being targeted is the development and delivery of appropriate modules of learning. At this point, the programs that are available are often very dependent on the local initiative and resources of the expertise available in that particular area, and thus there was a lack of consistency in quality.

### Recommendations

While there are many young people beginning to access a myriad of youth at-risk programs across Australia, there are still many marginalised young Australians who have no contact with any person or organisation that might have a proper means of connecting with them.

There are few established means of communicating, tracking and supporting these young people long-term and assisting them into relevant training and education. A whole range of young Australians are continuing to fall through the net. This is particularly true of those who are of school age are not attending but do not qualify, or are not suitable, for mainstream TAFE programs. It is interesting to note that the Blair Government acknowledges the need to provide these services for young people to the age of 13, an issue of some contention in our system. What sector is going to be responsible for those young people who are not at school but are not eligible to enrol into further education? This younger group represents a bigger and bigger issue that needs to be urgently addressed. Of those who do find their way to programs, there is very little support available other than funding that will put a teacher in front of a group of 15 to 20 disadvantaged learners.

These learners often can't begin to participate as they have so many other obstacles, for example homelessness, depression, drug abuse and corrections issues, that need to be addressed before any learning can take place. Many of these young people have found their own way to these programs as they really want to be part of mainstream society, to have a future, yet this motivation can often be deflated as the obstacles remain.

Infrastructure and ongoing commitment is needed to ensure these young people are assisted in a holistic way to manage and overcome the many obstacles that face them in their attempts to move on. In Victoria, VCAL (Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning) has been a welcome addition to the options available for young people by providing the opportunity for them to be acknowledged for learning in a

diverse range of settings and as suits their situation. However, the very nature of its flexibility can lead to some difficulties unless its implementation is followed through appropriately. An encouraging concept, it too needs to be properly resourced at all stages—for both students and staff involved—to achieve effective and relevant outcome. It has an exciting potential to make learning relevant for young people whilst valuing a holistic approach.

Throughout Australia there are many programs currently running successful programs that cater for young at-risk learners. An example of this is the Risk It—Re-Charge program, which is a partnership between Donvale Living and Learning Centre, Adult (ACE) and Eastern Access and Community Health. Another is the Youth CGEA (Certificate/s in General Education for Adults) program at Swinburne University, which offers a 20-hours-a-week program from four separate campuses. Yahoo is another example of a successful youth program, which meets the learning needs of rural young people. These are only a few of many successful programs.

Our research in England indicated to us that we are actually, in cases such as these, offering superior training options for young people. However, this success is limited as we do not have the coordinated infrastructure to build and develop our programs and offer the necessary additional support, as provided by the Connexions model.

Ad hoc and short-term funding arrangements dominate this area. Australia needs a coordinated service similar to that in England. The Connexions Service not only aims to deliver realistic training and essential support, but it is underpinned by a government policy that commits proper funding to ensure the service can operate in a professional, consolidated and cohesive manner.

Australian government policy, which is reflected in funding for similar support services for young at-risk people, should reflect the resource-intensive nature of successful practice. It must ensure successful provision for reaching and engaging young people, giving advice and guidance and supporting transition.

It is important that a commitment is made to investigate and profile existing programs that are already working towards meeting the needs of these young people

It is vital to develop partnerships between TAFE colleges, ACE and secondary schools to develop appropriate pathways and relevant programs to accommodate the varying needs and training provisions required by young people. For example, pathways from intensive small groups provision of Life Skill programs in ACE (such as Risk It—Re-charge) to more structured pre-vocational and vocational programs in TAFE. Within our own experience, we have seen very successful outcomes when this model is applied.

Successful outcomes could continue in providing opportunities for identified at-risk school students to undertake short 'taster'/alternative learning programs in ACE and TAFE

colleges while still remaining in the secondary system. This model has also been proven as advantageous in piloted experience. Many providers are seeking to extend this by scaffolding work-based experience for these young people by tutoring them to be work-ready through 'taster' work experience opportunities.

The benefits of allowing for a coordinated and well thought-through approach to the issues and needs of youth at risk, as evidenced by the Connexions program would be of great benefit. Not only would the young people have improved educational and lifelong opportunities, but Australia's national and state productivity would benefit greatly.

In order to achieve this, however, we need government policies that allow for strategies, infrastructure and reliable long-term funding to achieve what England is well on the way to achieving—improved lifelong opportunities for all young people and improved economic prospects for the nation.

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## 'practical matters' is coming!

in the next edition of Fine Print we will begin a new section called

### 'practical matters'

it will cover:

- practical strategies
- classroom experiences
- new teaching ideas

would you like to contribute?

contact us now on [valbec.vicnet.net.au](http://valbec.vicnet.net.au) or phone Jenni on 9376 3338

## Open Forum

We welcome your responses to the articles featured in *Fine Print*. See the back cover for contact details.

In this issue, we present Helen Macrae's plenary to the VALBEC Conference in May 2002. Helen was the foundation President of VALBEC.

### So you want to be a good member of VALBEC?

It was 1977. Daryl Evans, Heather Haughton, Helen Modra and I met to talk about forming an adult literacy council. Why did we do this? We had two simple goals, and I take great pleasure in all professional associations that have them.

We wanted to support each other in our work. We knew little about the theory and practice of adult literacy in those days. The task of forging that lay ahead of us. As it still, in part at least, does.

We wanted to advocate on behalf of adults who needed to be better at reading writing and maths. We knew that the number of people needing a stronger educational foundation was many—as it still is.

We thought a community-based, democratic organisation that gathered together the strength of everyone who had something to offer our enterprise was the best way to go. So we formed the Victorian Adult Literacy Council—which later changed its name to VALBEC.

Six years later, by 1983, we'd held quite a few conferences, published quite a few newsletters, got quite a few stories published in the newspapers, and honed our belief and argument that adult literacy is a right not a privilege, but we still had no formal government recognition and no line in the government's education budget. I think I'm right in saying we'd made no formal approach to the political system before then. It astonishes me now that we left it so long.

The Cain Government was newly elected and someone, I don't remember who, told us to get in touch with a competent effective backbencher called Joan Kirner and ask her advice. I knew her name. I'd read about her advocacy work representing parents of school students. I'd followed her preselection and her election into parliament. So we rang her up. She agreed to see us. I think she took us to afternoon tea in the member's dining room at parliament house. Who went? I think it was me, Daryl Evans and Aileen Treloar.

She heard us out. Then she asked, 'Is any one of you a member of the party?' We all looked a bit sheepish and admitted we weren't. 'Because', she went on, 'if you were,

you could write the policy. Policy is so important. Once there's a policy in place, we can act to implement it'. I joined the ALP the following week. I always say, 'I was recruited into the ALP by Joan Kirner'. It makes me sound more important than I am.

Within the month another backbencher with an education background, Noel Simpson and I sat down to write the ALP policy on adult literacy and basic education. A lot of hard work has followed and more has to come yet. But think of this—first we were four, then 12 came to the first public meeting we called to form VALBEC, and today 180 people came to this conference with many others who wanted to be here but couldn't be fitted into the venue.

WAVE—Women in Adult and Vocational Education—had a seminar with Joan Kirner last year on the subject of women's leadership. There's an interesting report of it on our website—[www.converse.com.au](http://www.converse.com.au). She said, 'If you want to get the ear of the government of the day, it's hard to get time with the minister, so go to see a good backbencher and work with them'.

Imagine a triangle. One side is the community—the voters...parents, learners, unions, churches, professional associations, industry bodies, providers and so forth are all along that side. Another side is the political system—party members, party policy and politicians are ranged along that side. The third side is the machinery of government—local government, state government and federal government, public servants and their departments.

I have four points I want to make about this picture of an ever-changing power relationship. They're summed up in four quotes:

- 1 It was Noel Simpson who told me that Joe Lo Bianco told him in the International Year of Literacy that if you want something to happen, then make sure you bring the community, politicians and public servants along with you.

Think again about the sides of the triangle. The community—the voters. The political party processes. The government department. You have to win them all over to your point of view.

- 2 Everybody, whether they're positioned as a public servant, as a community activist, or as Lynne Kosky—who is one minister in a whole Cabinet of them, with an electorate



to please—has to work on all three fronts all the time. The power to bring about change rests in the relationship between those three groups and that relationship is never static, by the way. Each configuration of the relationship has to be studied and understood and developed.

- 3 It's no good setting out to lobby and persuade unless you know what your position is—unless you've thought deeply about the issue and you've gathered the data, shaped the argument and so forth. Delia Bradshaw's school principal said in the 1960s, 'Kilbreda girls don't get jobs, they take a position!' Joan Kirner advises that you keep a newspaper clippings file, amongst other things. She does. She says it's amazing how many lobby groups don't do their homework. They don't know what they want. They come to lobby politicians with feelings of anger or frustration, not with well-articulated positions.
- 4 Have you ever said, 'VALBEC should do that?' Did you say it, thinking it was someone else's responsibility to do it? I hope not. If you're a member of VALBEC you *are* VALBEC. Why shouldn't it be you that does the work? Why should it be someone else? I'm a bush walker and it's conventional wisdom amongst bushwalkers that you can only go as fast as your slowest walker. An organization like VALBEC, and your union, needs everyone to do a bit so that the few don't get resentful and exhausted. And we all need to get ourselves fit enough to walk faster down the road of policy changes, and better terms and conditions.
- 5 I made the last quote up myself yesterday. 'There are good and bad public servants, good and bad community activists/organisations, good and bad public servants. And we all have our good and bad days, our good and bad leaders, our good and bad times...' some of us find ourselves differently positioned as one or another of those types of people at different times in our lives. Lynne Kosky was once a community activist, once a public servant, and is now a politician. In the 1970s and 1980s I was a community literacy activist. In the 1990s I was a public servant with literacy responsibilities. Now I'm back to being a community activist. I've been the same person all the way along. I've been guided by the same values and the same goals. I was differently positioned with different constraints and opportunities, that's all.

I've been around long enough to know that community activists who abuse all public servants just because they are public servants are ignorant and misguided. I also know that public servants who despise all community activists just because they're activists, are ignorant and misguided. I also know there are good and bad polities. We were fortunate to get the help of a good one in 1983.

What should we do from our different positions? We should think and think, and think again. We should interrogate what's going on around us. We should ask questions, gather the data, make the case, and set about the task of constructive persuasion. We should talk and talk, and then

talk again—to polities and public servants and to each other. We should remember all the while that each of us has particular constraints and pressures depending on where we are positioned.

It's our job as responsible citizens in a democracy to study the constraints—they are personal, systemic and political—and bring clarity, persistence, optimism and good will to our support for each other and our advocacy for others.

Helen Macrae is chairperson of the committee of management for the Glenroy Neighbourhood Learning Centre, editor of *Converse & Company*, online newspaper of WAVE at [www.converse.com.au](http://www.converse.com.au) and director of WAVE Consultancy.

## ACAL

25th National Conference

### **Bridging the divides: Exclusion/Inclusion**

1–2 November 2002

at Manly Pacific Parkroyal, Sydney

This conference will cover issues surrounding refugees, long-term unemployed, Indigenous Australians, rural populations, people with a disability, and the recent national and global events that are fostering new and old forms of social exclusion. Media commentary and community debate are amplifying these social divides and creating a wedge of discontent amongst Australians.

Many in the community are challenging these directions in an effort to bridge such divides. The 2002 ACAL Conference aims to provide an adult literacy and numeracy perspective on contemporary forms of social exclusion. The Conference will also showcase recent developments in adult literacy and numeracy policy, provision and practice.

This conference includes around 65 presentations focusing on the theme of Bridging the divides: Exclusion/Inclusion.

On-line registration is now available for quick and easy registration. Go to [www.hotelnetwork.com.au](http://www.hotelnetwork.com.au)

## And...

There will be an ACAL Forum preceding the Conference on Thursday 31 October

### **Recent arrivals in Australia: literacy for living**

For further information go to [www.hotelnetwork.com.au](http://www.hotelnetwork.com.au)

## Policy Update

This article provides a brief introduction to the employers' perspective drawn from *Employability skills—an employer perspective*, an issues paper published on the ACCI website. Author Rosa McKenna also extends an invitation to VALBEC members to contribute to this ongoing debate between the business and education communities. It may be the debate that shapes our future work.

### The new generic skills debate—a place for adult language, literacy and numeracy?

The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) and the Australian Business Council of Australia and other industry groups have embarked on a major exercise to ascertain what employers really think are the types of attitudes and skills required in work—either in an enterprise or being self employed. With funding from the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) and the Department of Education Science and Training (DEST) a number of publications are now available that promote a discussion about generic skills that has not been tackled since the work of the Mayer Committee in the early 90s.

#### Generic employability skills: an employer perspective

The business community regards the importance of knowledge work and knowledge workers as being the key to Australia's response to globalisation and future economic success. They emphasise the need for a community equipped to understand and participate in ongoing change and the role that education and training providers will have in this process.

The project, made up of a number of components, has identified the key generic employability skills that enterprise argues individuals should have along with the job-specific or relevant technical skills. The project, a literature review and case studies of large Australian enterprises, and case studies capturing information from medium and small enterprises through focus groups, employed a range of methodologies to provide advice on:

- possible new requirements for generic employability competencies that industry requires, or will require in the foreseeable future since the Mayer competencies were developed
- clear definition of what Australian industry and leading business enterprises mean by employability skills and the consistency of otherwise between the various terms similarly used
- a proposed suite of employability skills, including an outline of assessment, certification and reporting of

performance options that suit both industry and education

- industry (small medium and larger business) reactions to the proposed suite and reporting options.

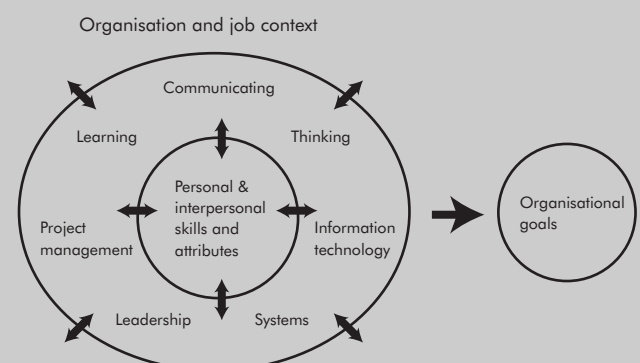
The Australian Council of Education Research (ACER) conducted a review of the literature and provided some useful differentiation between technical skills, job-specific skills and more general skills and personal attributes related to employment. Significantly while this work confirmed the ongoing relevance of the Mayer Key Competencies, it developed a working definition that is a significant departure from our understanding of generic skill in the Australian context.

The Mayer Committee resisted the inclusion of personal attributes, attitudes or characteristics from the final Key Competencies, unlike similar work such as the SCANS in the US and the basic skills movement in the UK.

The business community is claiming broad agreement that all young people need a set of personal attributes and skills that will prepare them for employment and further learning. They also recognise that the ongoing employability of individuals is dependent on their having a set of relevant skills as well as the capacity to learn new things. The business community has reframed these sets of personal attributes as employability skills.

Employability skills are defined as skills required not only to gain employment, but also to progress with an enterprise so as to achieve one's potential and contribute successfully to enterprise strategic directions.

The final product of the project is an Employability Skills Framework that is intended to contribute to the thinking and curriculum development of the Australian education and training system. See the figure below.



### Critical aspects underpinning the Employability Skills Framework

The Employability Skills Framework incorporates the following personal attributes that contribute to overall employability:

- Loyalty
- Commitment
- Honesty and integrity
- Enthusiasm
- Reliability
- Personal presentation
- Commonsense
- Positive self esteem
- Sense of humour
- Balanced attitude to work and home life
- Ability to deal with pressure
- Motivation
- Adaptability

The key skills identified in conjunction with the personal attributes to make up the Employability Framework are:

- *communication skills* that contribute to productive and harmonious relations between employees and customers
- *teamwork skills* that contribute to the productive working relationships and outcomes
- *problem-solving skills* that contribute to productive outcomes
- *initiative and enterprise skills* that contribute to innovative outcomes
- *planning and organising skills* that contribute to long-term and short-term strategic planning
- *self management skills* that contribute to ongoing improvement and expansion in employee and company operations and outcomes
- *technology skills* that contribute to the effective execution of tasks.

### Language literacy and numeracy

While I agree that it is desirable to know and understand the views of employers about what they believe are the skills required to enter and sustain ongoing employment, there are some significant problems with implementing any form of generic employability skills. The re-opening of the debate, however, does provide a platform for reintroducing discussion that may tease out a better understanding of communication—or language, literacy and numeracy—skills that appear to underpin the ways people present themselves in their work, and to explore the extent that these can be taught and assessed. Employers will need the education community to implement any framework they develop. It will therefore need to be both teachable and assessable.

There appears very little understanding among employers that it is the way that individuals use a repertoire of linguistic

skills that enables them to operate effectively in a range of social contexts, including work, as well as to think and resolve problems. It is these skills that underpin the capacity to work in or lead a team, to plan and manage their own learning or provide customer service. The inclusion of personal characteristics in relation to employment is quite dangerous and may serve to exclude competent people from work on the basis of quite discriminatory criteria—what is the right attitude? what is funny? to whom do you owe loyalty?

The Key Competencies developed by the Mayer Committee have been validated through this project, and the resistance to the inclusion of attributes, attitudes or personal characteristics as key competencies has also been vindicated. This discussion about the ways in which generic employability skills could be assessed are the same as when the Mayer Committee was considering generic skills and these still apply. Had the Key Competencies included—as originally intended—a category on culture, then ways of defining what society values among groups of individuals and ways of valuing the attribute of working in a multicultural, pluralist or diverse community could be recognised.

The ACER review confirms the view that the Key Competencies still have not been embedded in education assessment and reporting process. While many of these ideas have been captured in the curriculum developments in the schooling sector and have been valued in the more recent national goals for schooling, they still do not form part of the formalised assessment and certification system. In the VET system, the Key Competencies are located at the end of units of competency in training packages. They appear tacked on. The assignment of level is confusing and the meaning is not necessarily integrated with any of the critical knowledge and skills articulated in the unit. The Key Competency levels do not relate to, or are confused with, the levels of the AQF. The statements themselves are too generic and for any serious implementation need to be made specific to each training package for them to be assessable. Should they be taken up more seriously within the construct of a Unit of Competency there would be greater opportunity to explore the micro-skills required in the industry context that would make them both relevant and assessable.

The assessment and certification options being canvassed require serious consideration by the education community. Will these skills as defined by employers become the new basic skills and define our work? Do we want a generic employability skills test to be introduced? Do we want an extension of the graduate skills assessment? Do we want to develop a level of the AQF at which one would need to be certified as having these prerequisite skills or do we wish to improve the quality of training packages as the vehicle for dealing with generic skills adequately at all levels of the AQF? Will these skills replace what is currently gained through general education?

Continued on page 12...

## Beside the Whiteboard

**Carmel Davies teaches English at Preston AMES and Fitzroy Learning Network. She has taught ESL for more than 20 years, and her experience encompasses work with refugees in transit camps in Thailand, teaching English to Middle Eastern doctors in Europe, and working in a variety of AMES centres and migrant hostels in Australia. Inspired by the stories of her students, Carmel wrote the play *I Came Without my Mother's Hand* (2000), and more recently she co-wrote *Kan Yama Kan (Once Upon a Time)* which focuses on the stories of the most recent refugee communities, due to be staged in Melbourne in July.**

**Carmel talks to Sarah Deasey about how she came to writing and teaching.**

### **Can you tell us about the impact of working with refugees for you, personally and professionally?**

I have been teaching refugees for over 20 years and I have witnessed how important it is for people to feel secure in, accepted and welcomed by their new country. People need to feel they belong somewhere and have a country. This is very important in helping people recover from their trauma.

Our country has for so long been a home for the displaced, a haven for people in danger, a safe place where no one will knock on your door and drag you away at midnight. Despite backward developments like the Australia First and One Nation parties, Australians are generally pretty fair minded, generous and welcoming. In my experience Australians take you as they find you.

With this tradition, it is all the more shocking and shameful that the asylum seekers of the last four years have been treated as less than human, and locked up in isolated military-style camps. Some of the most vulnerable people on earth are being treated very badly at this moment. Their treatment is worse than our government treats criminals. And those who do get visas have no security, cannot access English classes and have no right to bring their families here.

I travelled to Woomera after the Easter riots, and managed to get into the detention centre and talk with a detainee. The person I met had been inside for three years, his name is DON 154! It was a very sobering experience to witness how people are being driven to madness and suicide in these camps.

### **Are there people or ideas that have influenced your work?**

When I started working at AMES I was very impressed with the strong positive relationships between teachers and the interest and enthusiasm people had for their work. The 80s was a period of great creativity and pedagogical interest in the field of ESL and at lunchtimes there were always lively discussions and interchanges about students, learning processes, teaching materials, new teaching ideas and so on. Many people were involved in developing new materials and doing research or both. In those days AMES was a fairly democratic organisation (not top heavy with centralised bureaucrats) so teachers with new ideas had a lot of encouragement and ability to move around the different programs.

Maggie Power, an AMES teacher presently at St Albans, has been a great inspiration to me. She was a colleague at Collingwood AMES and we worked together on an ESL support text, *Pictures into Words*, which is based on real stories from our students.

Maggie has a great sense of humour and real empathy with her students. She is also a wonderful classroom teacher.

Maggie introduced me to the ideas of Elsa Auerbach, author of *ESL for Action*, and through that book I have learnt about the educational processes of dialogue developed by Paolo Freire. The process starts from a student's life experience, it asks them to believe in themselves, to believe that they have knowledge that they bring to the class. It acknowledges a richness of experience and everyone, including the teacher, participates in the dialogue as co-learners.

The teaching materials are not developed before the start of the program but are created in the class from the students' experience. These resources are then used for learning and peer teaching. Because of their social and emotional involvement in the curriculum, this approach is a powerful motivating factor in language learning. Teaching and learning in this way is an exciting and joyful process and *I love my job!*

### **What gave you the initial impetus to write plays?**

I joined the Brunswick Women's Theatre Group in 1996, and acted in three of their plays. The process of workshopping and developing a performance from the personal stories of the actors was a transforming experience. It gave me the insights and the confidence to use these skills in my own work. Suddenly I saw how the rich and diverse experiences of our students could be shared outside the classroom in a dramatic storytelling form no matter what the students' level of English. Performances can get information across and expand people's horizons. For the performers, it gives them a great sense of confidence and assertiveness and really improves their communication in English.

The first play we did was for the North Richmond Community Health Centre's AGM. The students performed *Dr. Panadol*, a series of hilarious skits where the doctor gives everyone a Panadol, no matter what their complaint. The real doctors continued on page 23...