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Editorial

Welcome to the winter edition of 2006. Are you settling in to a long and uninterrupted Term 2 and 3, after the six-week whirlwind of the Commonwealth Games-driven Term 1? Then *Fine Print* will provide material for quiet reflection.

This issue brings writers from diverse contexts: a Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN), AMES, ACE, TAFE and the union movement. A common theme for this edition's features section is employment.

Jodie Matthews, from the South Gippsland Bass Coast LLEN, describes a project in which TAFE, local business, ACE and Job Network providers collaborated to help young people obtain a 'work-ready' certificate for the retail and hospitality industries. The program includes a mix of accredited and non-accredited content, customised to suit the needs of young people in the region. Maree Keating from the Textile Clothing and Footwear Union looks at the job market from another perspective—that of the retrenched worker. Maree describes a project which illuminates particular issues for these workers, their difficulties in accessing new pathways and new jobs amid misconceptions about employability and literacy. Like the South Gippsland projects, the partnerships—this time with TAFE, Jobnetwork, Centrelink and the union—worked best in meeting their needs.

In his article on project-based learning Martyn Brogan from AMES gives us a fresh look at the philosophy and methodology of group work in an adult learning context, and how such activities link to employability skills. For any teachers wanting some practical strategies for learning to learn activities, this is for you. We move from the job market and all its challenges to another constant question for ESL and literacy teachers:

How do we teach the difference between standard and non-standard English in a way that will show that we value our students' language and culture, and at the same time raise their awareness about the uses and contexts for standard English?

Rosemary McKenry answers this question in a practical feature article, See Youse Later.

Our regular items in this edition continue with some of the themes raised in the features.

Lynne Matheson's Practical Matters piece on her work with student publications, is a perfect example of project-based learning. Lynne tells us about the development of the student-run newsletter RAW at Carlton Neighbourhood Learning Centre from 1998 to 2005. In Open Forum we have a snapshot of the Traralgon Neighbourhood House award-winning computer program where 17 computer courses can be running at any one time. Cheryl Wilkinson from ACFE talks about the ACFE research strategy with three projects: generic skills, men's participation in ACE programs, and the ACE longitudinal study of learners. Each research project has been complemented by Circles of Professional Practice based in ACE organisations.

Foreign Correspondence always provides a chance to look outward and enjoy the perspective of a different culture, and Snezana Dabic takes us to the experience of teaching in China. The title Certificate of English for Business and Global Communication sounds dry, but Snezana takes us to the heart of the cross-cultural teaching experience in both a practical and uplifting way.

Finally, in Beside the Whiteboard we honour and farewell Fran O'Neill. Fran, a former *Fine Print* editorial committee convenor, has recently resigned from the shared presidency of VALBEC. She talks about her long association with VALBEC, an association that spans many years.

Fine Print offers a balanced fare of theory, policy and practice. Read the articles as the mood takes you. As always, the editorial committee would love to hear your views on the articles we publish. Please send any responses and/or reflections to us at info@valbec.org.au

Sarah Deasey
Convenor
Fine Print Editorial Committee

The Victorian Adult Literacy and Basic Education Council (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.

See youse later: teaching English literacy to Australians

by Rosemary McKenry

Australian English constantly evolves and adapts, with cultural and localised variations developing into dialects or rejoining the mainstream language as words and phrases become part of everyday use. The question of balance arises through the need to teach standard English while maintaining respect for non-standard English users' language and culture.

You know the scenario. The eloquent sigh. The stage exasperation, the eye roll, the toxic pout. Imagine you ask your P-plate daughter to return the car by midnight and Cinderella retorts, "whatever". You tell the waiter the ambient music is too loud and garcon rejoins, "whatever". You confide an office crisis to your housemate and they sling "whatever" over their shoulder!

This article concentrates on students who, often without realising it, use variations or dialects of Standard Australian English (SAE). Why do they speak like this? I will ask and answer this question and refer to some relevant research findings. Through these discussions I will suggest ways teachers can help students differentiate between a dialect and SAE, and explain why it is important that we do. In discussing these issues I will draw on my experience working in various environments including schools with Indigenous students; students from language and cultural backgrounds other than English and with other students from primary, secondary schools and Bendigo Regional Institute of TAFE (BRIT).

Students who use a non-standard English and don't know they do

Examples of non-standard English are:

- I done me 'omework last night.
- Yesterday I seen a snake on the way 'ere.
- We was 'avin' lunch.
- There's six people in our family.
- On Mondy night we had tea down the street.
- What did youse do last night?
- That's me book what I got for me birthdy.
- That is so you don't want to go there!

Examples of the way students from the Bendigo region speak:

- I was so over it.
- I'm so not doing this.
- She was like, sort of weird so I like wanted to say hi to her.

- I bet (as past tense of beat) him in the race.
- pov (old and run-down).
- Random (out of the ordinary).
- Dodgy (no good).
- Whatever ...

Why do people talk like this?

We all want to feel that we are part of a group. If we follow a football team we probably yell and scream using the English language in quite a different way from when we ask a bank manager for a loan, or try to impress during a job interview. Supporting Australia in the Commonwealth Games gave us the opportunity to feel part of a group and to use the appropriate language. *Aussie, Aussie, Aussie, Oi, Oi, Oi*. Being able to talk like others in our chosen group helps our sense of self and gives us a sense of security. Being able to use the dialect of that group is part of our experience of belonging.

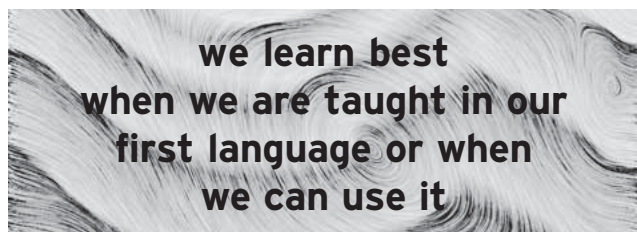
When I was teaching at Shepparton High School I had a student, Angela, who had just arrived from Greece. She quickly progressed with her English to the point where one day she used the phrase "See youse later" in front of me. As her ESL teacher I told her that "See youse later" was not Standard Australian English. However, when she was talking to her new Australian friends she could choose to speak like that because that was how her peers spoke. She needed to feel that she was accepted. She also needed to know that there was another way to speak. So she learned "See you later" as well.

Indigenous Australians usually choose to use a form of Aboriginal English when together and may tease someone who speaks Standard Australian English in that environment. While in Shepparton I was asked by a group of Koori women who belonged to the Goulburn Valley Aboriginal Consultative Group to work with them to develop a professional development course and resources to help teachers understand that Kooris spoke Koori English at home. They did not want their children to lose their Koori English because Koori English is a vital part of their identity. At the same

time they wanted them to be able to use Standard Australian English when they needed it. So over a three-year period we developed *Deadly eh Cuz! Teaching Speakers of Koori English*. During those three years primary, secondary and TAFE teachers did their own action research to find out what worked for their students, and these findings became part of the research package.

What does research tell us about the way people speak?

Students may not know they use a dialect. A few years ago I visited Canada to study the ways English was being taught to students whose home language was not English. I met with teachers, education consultants and academics including Jim Cummins and Elizabeth Coelho in Toronto. Both had been researching how people learn language and have written many books on the subject. Elizabeth Coelho pointed out that teachers need to be aware that some students won't recognise that they speak a dialect of English. She said that there is a kind of inter-language or a mixture of languages that has both the standard language as well as the linguistic features of a dialect.



Most Australian students speak such a mixture, yet they may not realise that they do this. We learn best when we are taught in our first language or when we can use it. There are also many other researchers, including Australians, who have shown that when we can use our first language—the language we use for thinking and making sense of what we see and hear—we learn faster and better. Once we have gained an understanding of a new idea, concept or piece of knowledge we can usually transfer that to another language. If a student speaks Chinese at home, for example, and has an understanding of a maths concept in Chinese, he or she will have a better chance of understanding what the Australian teacher is saying than if he or she had no knowledge of that concept at all and had to make sense of English unaided.

Literacy teaching needs a real context and a real purpose. I met Jim Cummins at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and was impressed by his knowledge and dedication to social justice through providing access to language. Cummins talked a lot about de-contextualised language, saying that the jump from primary to secondary education is enormous. Whereas primary teachers usually provide real contexts for children to experience, such as blocks for maths or excursions for social studies, secondary students frequently have to grapple with

text books that provide little or no relation to student experience. Cummins says that if our teaching is not backed up by visuals or hands-on experience that provides a real context, many students will find it too difficult to grasp.

Students can gain control of language if they are taught language awareness. Kriol is the first language of most Kimberley Indigenous people these days. However, most teachers do not use Kriol as the language of instruction. So most students struggle to understand what is taught because the language used by teachers is not the same as the language they have in their heads and that they need for making sense of what they hear and see in school. Fortunately, more and more schools are now taking note of the world-wide research that shows the benefits of using the home language to teach when children are young. There is a superb resource used widely in northern Australia titled *Making the jump: A resource book for teachers of Aboriginal students*, written by Rosalind Berry and Joyce Hudson, which is based on this language awareness research.

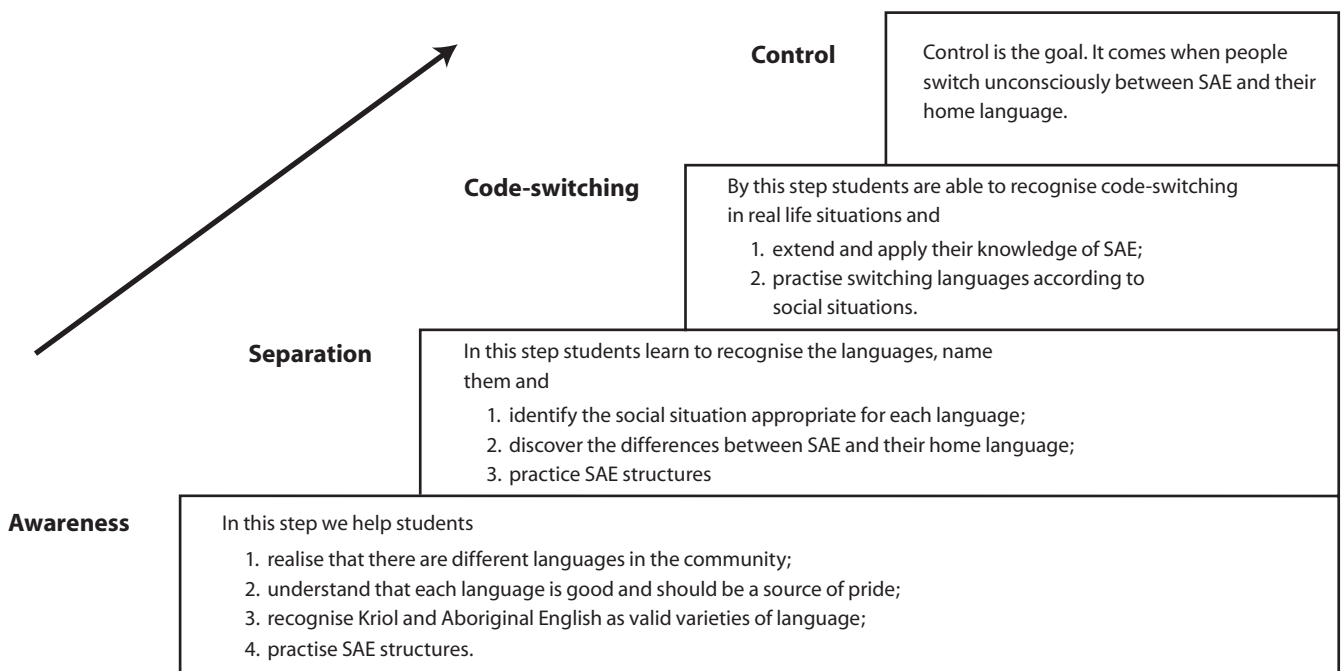
Berry and Hudson developed a code-switching stairway that shows the structure of a language program for Kriol speakers. It begins with general language awareness and ends with the students having a control of language that empowers students to choose the linguistic form of language that is most appropriate for a particular audience and purpose. See figure 1.

This is interesting, but how can Victorian teachers utilise this knowledge? Should teachers be using teenage talk to teach classes because teenagers think in their own dialect? Should teachers deliberately use 'bad grammar' when speaking to the students to acknowledge a shared identity? No, I'm not suggesting that! But it is essential that teachers show students the differences between the various dialects of English, and give them opportunities to understand and practice making language choices that are appropriate, giving them the knowledge as to how to translate (when needed) from one dialect of English to another.

Coelho has worked with students who migrated to Canada from the Caribbean. Her research strongly recommends that non-standard speakers be taught the differences between what they speak and "what the educated world speaks". She was convinced the reason for the Caribbean students' high illiteracy rate was the fact that Creole was their first language but in school they were taught in standard English. Without awareness of language differences people are disadvantaged. Without this awareness many students will fail to achieve the power to live their lives to the fullest.

I use the term language awareness to mean *knowing* about language. Language has structure; it can have many variations

Figure 1: Code-switching stairway (structure of a language program for Kriol speakers)



Source: Berry, Rosalind & Hudson, Joyce (1997), *Making the jump: A resource book for teachers of Aboriginal students*, W.A: Kimberley Region Catholic Education Office.

(or dialects) within it; language also has tone and register. As teachers, we need to teach students that there are many forms of English used in Australia on a daily basis: formal and informal English; different genres such as recount, report and narratives; and American English. There are differences in the way English is spoken on different radio stations, in city and rural areas, and within social and ethnic groups. Koori English is only one form of Aboriginal English. Young people have vocabularies that change frequently. Email and text messaging have revolutionised the way we communicate. This knowledge offers people choice so that they may communicate effectively to achieve a particular purpose and suit a particular audience. To do this a person needs a language to think—or speak or write—about language.

I have adapted Berry and Hudson's (1997) code-switching stairway to highlight the ways I work with students to develop a growing knowledge of language awareness.

Building general language awareness of:

- different languages and different dialects within a language (students' first or chosen languages are respected)
- the ways people change the way they communicate according to audience and purpose (students could identify non-standard English in books, in songs and in movies)

- non-standard English (such as teenage talk) being different from standard Australian English (students develop the skills to translate from one to the other)
- non-standard English having a place, helping young people feel a sense of belonging
- their ability to choose between non-standard English and standard Australian English, based on their understanding of audience and purpose.

Developing Standard Australian English awareness of:

- decoding strategies, phonics and spelling rules
- grammar; so they have a language to talk about language
- different genre
- audience and purpose
- all facets of language, including speaking
- critical literacy, so that they can not only control which linguistic form to use themselves but also become aware of other people's agendas.

I have used my own teaching experience, and the work of a few researchers, to propose the use of the language awareness progression in language and literacy education programs. But the most proficient research and decision-making comes from the teachers who daily take up the challenge to assess, plan and implement a literacy program that caters for their students' **Continued on page 28...**

Work Ready with a Head Start

by Jodie Matthews

In south Gippsland and along the Bass Coast, an innovative project draws on the resources of the local TAFE, businesses, ACE and Job Network to create a specialised one-week training course that helps young locals find casual work in the retail and hospitality industries.

The Head Start program is a collaborative, community capacity-building project delivering Work Ready training to young people seeking employment in the retail or hospitality industries. Retail and hospitality businesses are two of the largest employers of youth in many parts of South Gippsland and Bass Coast, and education providers within the region and across local government areas have collaborated to develop a program that meets local needs. The program runs over five six-hour days and provides participants with the basic skills that local employers are looking for.

The program is a partnership of Foster Community House, GippsTafe, the South Gippsland Bass Coast Local Learning Employment Network (SGBCLLEN—the lead agency), South Gippsland Shire Council and Workways Leongatha in South Gippsland (called Head Start) and a partnership of Chisholm Institute, SGBCLLEN and Your Employment Solutions in Bass Coast (called Work Ready).

This innovative program is delivered in two South Gippsland locations, Foster and Leongatha, and one Bass Coast location, Wonthaggi. Its profile is growing as the program has been recognised with a number of awards. In early 2005, Head Start won an Innovative Learning Award through Adult Education Week, and was a part of highly commended award for GippsTafe, Excellence in VET in Schools. The Foster Community House program was recognised as 'best practice' by the ACE Sector and was nominated for the Learning Choices Expo for 2006.

The programs are community capacity-building at its finest, and indeed the relationships established as a result of the course have continued to grow into other areas benefiting both young people and the wider community through the relationships and organisational cooperation developed.

Background

At the end of 2003, a partnership of the SGBCLLEN and Creatively Connecting Communities in Bass Coast Shire formed to work with young people on a Work Ready Certificate. The one-week preparation course for casual

employment in hospitality responded to the needs of young people to gain skills that would enable them to take advantage of the casual work available during busy times, and for these students and employers to have a link through a casual employment register. Employers were surveyed to ensure that course content reflected local need.

The course ran in Wonthaggi at the end of 2003, and was considered successful by all parties involved. It was repeated in Bass Coast Shire at the end of 2004 and the project model was 'exported' to the South Gippsland Shire and renamed Head Start to run in Leongatha and Foster. In 2004 across both shires, 25 students participated in the course. All students spoke positively about the course and acknowledged that they felt it helped them be competitive in the job market. Learner pathways included employment in hospitality and retail, returning to school, and ongoing employment (for those already employed). The program then took on recommendations from 2004 and delivered the program again in 2005 in all three locations.

2005 program setup

Negotiations about dates occurred early in the year with South Gippsland Secondary College making Head Start a part of their Year 10 work experience program in Foster (last week of Term 3), and Leongatha schools opting for a school holidays course (first week of school holidays



between Terms 3 and 4). Bass Coast chose to run their program in late November. There was some concern from an employment outcome point of view about whether September or November would be a better time to run the course, but employment outcomes did not reflect this (see results below).

Foster

Funded hours from Foster Community Centre were used to reduce cost as well as some funded hours from GippsTafe. GippsTafe was contracted to deliver the course with Workways Leongatha delivering the work skills and managing the casual employment register.

Leongatha

Funded hours from GippsTafe were used to reduce the cost and they delivered the course. Workways Leongatha again conducted the employment training and casual employment register.

Wonthaggi

Funded hours from Chisholm TAFE ensured the course was more cost effective and therefore sustainable. These funded hours were set aside by Chisholm early in the year. Fortunately, change of personnel at Chisholm Institute had little impact on the program. Its potential for the projects long-term sustainability is central to all project partners. 2005 also saw the conclusion of the Creatively Connecting Communities Project which meant the loss of a project partner. However, the history of the project's success ensured that this had minimal impact on the program. Your Employment Solutions delivered the employment training and conducted the casual employment register.

With the program in its third year, it was much easier to implement. Indeed, partners involved were far more proactive in 2005, ensuring that the LLEN could take a step back from the program in 2006 and see it continue. The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), which outlined responsibilities and ethical approaches to the project, was signed in 2004 and remained valid for 2005 with all parties willing to continue in similar roles.

In response to the key issues and recommendations that evolved since the program's inception, the MOUs (with the respective project program partners)—in delivering a Bass Coast Work Ready Certificate through Chisholm Institute of TAFE's Wonthaggi Campus or a South Gippsland Head Start Certificate through GippsTafe Institute's South Gippsland Campus and Foster Community House—referred to the following outcomes:

- To develop a collaborative, sustainable and innovative training model between local employers, young people, Job Network and training providers that can be used

to build the skills of and relationships between young (potential) employees and employers.

- To provide the opportunity for local businesses to participate in dialogue and hands-on training which contributes to the development and delivery of an innovative, quality and relevant introductory retail training program for young people.
- To develop the skills of participants to better prepare them for casual work in the hospitality industry.
- To link participants into the Get a Job Casual Employment Registry on completion of their certificate.
- To create a learning pathway for further training in hospitality and retail by delivering accredited training modules.
- To promote the project as a community capacity-building project that is co-branded with the logos of partnership organisations.

Communication was the key to ensuring that everyone knew what was going on and the set up of an email group ensured all communications were delivered. Regular updates of progress and a couple of face-to-face meetings were held to keep the project progressing.

Who did what?

The SGBCLLEN played a major role in coordinating, marketing and managing the projects across all sites and with all project partners.

In the Bass Coast Shire, Chisholm TAFE conducted the training. The timetable in 2005 saw the implementation of suggestions from 2004 to include more practical hospitality skills. The balance between delivering accredited modules and practical experience is still being experimented with. Your Employment Solutions taught the employment skills and coordinated the casual employment register for the project. The objective for 2005 was to see the register work more effectively for young people. Creatively Connecting Communities bequeathed \$1000 toward program costs and continues to be an acknowledged presence.

In the South Gippsland shire, GippsTafe conducted the training in both locations and hosted the program in Leongatha. The 2005 timetable saw the implementation of suggestions to include more hospitality skills. Since this was where the students tended to get work it made sense to include more. We also tried to include more practical skills, again at the suggestion of the students, whilst ensuring that students still obtained three accredited modules from both the Certificate II in Retail and Hospitality (one from Retail, two from Hospitality). GippsTafe also used funded hours in Leongatha.

Workways Leongatha taught the employment skills and coordinated the casual employment register for the project. Workways expanded the casual employment register beyond Head Start students and are taking this service to the wider community. In 2005 the aim was to see the register work more effectively for young local people. The South Gippsland Shire Council continued its involvement with endorsement, contacts and sponsorship of the program. Foster Community House hosted the program in Foster, and ensured the program became an integral part of both the school's curriculum and the wider community. Foster Community House used VET-funded hours to reduce the cost, and established the relationships with the local employers who were involved in the delivery of the program.

The partnerships with Job Network Providers had add-on benefits as organisations now cooperate more closely for different community needs than in the past. It has also meant that Job Network Providers are working with a group of clients they are not necessarily funded for, but a social obligation to assist this cohort is being met.

Marketing the project

Marketing material was developed and delivered to schools as a media kit. The kit included an article for publication in their newsletters, registration forms and posters for display around the school. Regular contact with careers teachers meant they knew where the LLEN was coming from for the program. Press releases were also sent to local media. Marketing of the program was more effective in 2005 partly because marketing saturation occurred (local media and schools at the same time), and partly because the program now had 'runs on the board' so to speak.

Partners for the project also conducted marketing and identified potential participants for the course from their own database of clients. In Bass Coast shire we aimed for 12 participants and got 17. Most participants were 14–15 years of age, only two of this group of 17 were male.



One student was asked to leave the program on Day 4 because of misbehaviour. Another student arrived late on Day 1 and was a no-show on Day 4 and Day 5, so 15 students completed the program.

In South Gippsland Shire we aimed for 12 participants in each location. Foster had 15 participants (this was the maximum number and we had to turn others away) and ten students in Leongatha. One student who signed up for the course got a job prior to the course commencing. Leongatha's course ran in the school holidays, so from the organisation's point of view this was a great outcome considering these students were doing it in their own time. Leongatha had one male and nine female students with the majority of participants being 14–15 years of age. Foster Community House had 11 female and four male students participate averaging 14–15 years of age. Foster's enrolment also included known 'at risk' students and four (two Community) VCAL students.

We also developed a brochure in 2004 to market the students to employers through the development of a casual employment register. The casual employment register in both LGAs had worked all year, with a clientele larger than the young people involved in the Head Start and Work Ready programs. In effect, the idea of a casual employment register had succeeded locally but most students from the programs still obtained their employment outcomes through door-knocking.

The SGBCLLEN coordinated the registration of students, the mailing out of information about course outlines etc. and certificates on completion. Students received a certificate from the TAFE for accredited modules, but it was felt that certificates outlining all the course content, carrying the logos of the local project partners would have more 'clout' for the students when they went job seeking. Figure 1 reproduces the timetable.

Accredited units were OH&S, Food handling, Cash handling. The Service and Coffee are not full units, but come out of the training package. A Coffee Appreciation Certificate was issued to each student separate to their TAFE or course certificate.

The week before the course began, a list of registered students was sent to all project partners and forwarded to schools involved to ensure students were not marked as unexplained absences.

Overall, there were 41 participants in the program (two did not finish). In early 2006, 31 of the 39 students who completed the Head Start and Work Ready Courses were contacted. Twelve students found employment after their

Figure 1: Sample timetable

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Introduction of everyone Course overview What is retail? Occupational Health & Safety	THHGHS01B Food handling	Coffee	Practical service	Cash handling Eftpos Review
WRRER1B Working effectively in a retail environment	THHGHS01B Food handling (cont.)	Workways (Resumes/ interviews job applications) Coffee	Practical service	Function with employers/ council/ partners involved

course. Of the 19 students who were not working, only seven had job-searched with what is defined as maximum effort (applying for five or six jobs). This equates to 63 per cent job outcomes for those students wanting employment in the summer following the course. Another student, not accounted for in the above employment outcomes and who was highly at-risk in the course in Foster, has now returned to school and has obtained a SBNA.

The project and the program continue to evolve. Some of the recommendations for implementation in 2006 and beyond encompass:

- Consulting more closely with schools about when the courses can best be run to complement school programs like work experience programs, as well as optimise summer holiday/casual work opportunities.
- Coordinating the marketing of programs to sustain programs' profiles and credibility.
- Looking at the inclusion of a greater range of topics and less accredited modules to ensure a broader range of skills is covered. This recommendation is seen as problematic because accredited modules equate to funded hours of delivery. In 2005 a successful 'general service' day of non-accredited was included.
- Incorporating local junior campuses in the communication loop.
- Trialling an agricultural version of Work Ready for older learners who are looking for casual work as dairy/farm hands. This will be trialled in 2006 with Corinnella Community Centre.
- Trialling an increased work skills focus in the course.
- Implementing excursions to larger retail outlets. Class information could make more sense with a trip to a larger centre like Morwell, Fountain Gate or Chadstone.
- Including retail skills such as merchandising and service so the course is a combination of hospitality and retail work-readiness. This makes sense because these two areas are the biggest employers of our youth Australia-wide,

and the interest in both areas was identified in the feedback from the students. We ran a purely retail model in 2004 in South Gippsland and slanted the course toward hospitality in 2005, but a combined course is more needed by the youth of the area. However, as mentioned before, non-accredited transferable general service skills were included in all locations, and these can continue to develop and change with the need of the clientele and businesses in the area.

Certainly, we felt that we have met all program objectives. Sustainability still seems a little away for Bass Coast, and with the use of TAFE funded hours and their funding structure, there will always be a significant part of the cost passed on to students without the use of a community centre and ACE funded hours, which are far more flexible in their use. Perhaps 2006 will see the introduction of a new partner from the ACE sector to reduce costs to participants and therefore ensure the program's sustainability. Inverloch Community House has expressed an interest in the program in 2006.

In Foster; the 2006 discussions will address the degree of SGBCLLEN's continued involvement in the program as the program has become an integral part of the community.



Leongatha may still need some assistance from the LLEN to ensure its sustainability in the future. Funding may be an issue in 2006, and this will be the main issue for the coordinator next year.

In judging a program's success it is important to recognise the voices of the students who participated. The feedback was that most students thought the programs were great. Of particular benefit were the practical aspects covered in the food handling units and the coffee making. The Foster students were asked what they thought was the most important thing they gained from the course. Some of the responses speak volumes for how the program was received:

The knowledge and the new skills that will enhance our opportunity and experience to choose a career path in the hospitality and retail areas of employment

... to treat every one with integrity and use all the skills we've gained to the best of our abilities

We've gained the knowledge to build business, provide good customer service and to think outside the box.

Jodie was once an 'at-risk' teenager who failed Year 10. At 20, she returned to school, completed a Media Communications degree at Southern Cross University in 1996, and was awarded the ABC Radio prize for highest achievement in Media and Culture. Jodie joined the South Gippsland Bass Coast Local Learning and Employment Network in 2004.

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“What you do first is get them into groups”: project-based learning and teaching of employability skills

by *Martyn Brogan*

Group activities form the core of project-based learning (PBL), and are a proven method for developing employability skills. This article looks at PBL activities undertaken by a group of adult learners from non-English-speaking backgrounds, and is a clear, informative and interesting account which also offers teachers some useful strategies for Learning to Learn activities.

This article describes one model of project-based learning (PBL) to develop generic employability skills using group work. The first part of this article outlines a PBL model. The second section focuses on the need to develop group work skills to achieve PBL and will present ideas on how to do this. The generic employability skills that were learnt throughout one particular project will then be outlined.

There is no single definition of PBL. Doing a Google search using the term ‘project-based learning’ demonstrates this point. Perhaps Long’s (1985: 89) definition of task-based learning, old though it is, might be adequate as a definition of PBL. He defines a ‘task’ as:

a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely, or for some reward ... examples of tasks include painting a fence, dressing a child, filling out a form, buying a pair of shoes, making an airline reservation, borrowing a library book, taking a driving test, typing a letter, weighing a patient ... in other words, by ‘task’ is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in between.

Although Long was defining a ‘task’, he could have been defining a ‘project’. I think he would agree that the topic of the PBL can involve anything that the learners feel is worth doing. Although this article refers to the types of PBL activities done by non-English-speaking background (NESB) learners at Certificates in Spoken and Written English (CSWE) Level 3, subsequent and previous uses of PBL methodologies have been used with a range of learners from International Second Language Proficiency Ratings (ISLPR) Levels 1 (post-beginners) to 5 (native speakers). It has also been implemented for a range of purposes—teaching the CSWE 1, the Certificates in General Education for Adults (CGEA) Certificate I (Introductory), the CSWE 3, the CGEA 2 and other post-compulsory mainstream certificate courses.

The rationale for project-based learning

There are many reasons for using PBL in language teaching and the teaching of adults. PBL is based on adult learning principles where learners are involved in their learning and have some autonomy. Learners are encouraged to apply past experiences to new knowledge and skills. During the PBL experience, and through the use of the suggested group work procedures, a climate of mutual respect and trust is developed which helps enhance self-esteem and arguably employability. Many of the principles, practices and skills involved in PBL are reportedly valued in the Australian workplace culture.¹ The group work approach encourages teamwork and cooperation. Each learner has something to teach and something to learn while completing the group activities required for a project. The necessarily cooperative approach to the learning gives value to each learner. These aspects of PBL make it particularly useful in adult learning contexts.

A process for project-based learning

As with the definitions of PBL, there are a myriad of suggested processes for implementing a PBL event. In this article I’m providing a generic overview of the processes involved before discussing these further.

- 1 Preparation to build a trusting cooperative environment, and engage learners in self and peer evaluations through:
 - a series of ‘group building’ activities (this is a key component of the process and will be discussed in greater detail below)
 - lessons about finding, evaluating and using resources through the development of research skills
 - the development and practice of time management skills
 - lessons on individual and group presentation skills.
- 2 Forming groups (this is another key component of the process and will also be discussed in greater detail below).

- 3 Selecting a topic.
- 4 Planning
 - defining the project ‘questions’
 - allocating tasks, leadership roles
 - making timelines.
- 5 Researching
 - locating, evaluating and synthesising resources.
- 6 Developing ‘products’ (for example, group presentations).
- 7 Presentation of the project findings.
- 8 Evaluation (teachers, peers, small group, and self evaluation).

Working in groups

The key feature of the PBL activities I describe in this article is the need for effective groups. If the following pre- and post-group work issues are considered and addressed, PBL or any group-based learning should be more successful. Tasks will not only be successful in terms of the project objectives but also in terms of the learners acquiring and practising generic skills.

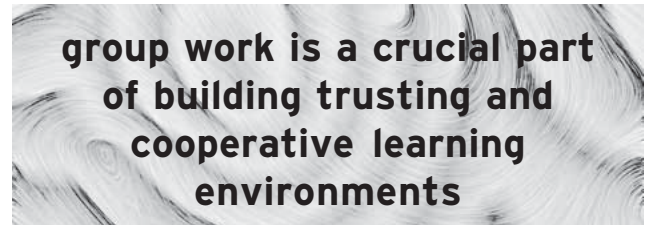
It is important to be clear with learners about the objectives of the project and your own objectives for the use of groups to complete a project. It may be necessary to explain to the learners why you think group work is valuable for their learning (for example, group work gives learners more practice using language, allows quieter learners more opportunities to speak and teaches learners about expected employability skills). It may also be a good idea to find out who has done group work previously and who has not. Teachers could then mix experienced group learners with those who are not. Throughout all of the group work preparation activities, teachers need to show learners that group work is as valued as are learners’ efforts.

When group tasks are completed within the lesson time, it can be useful to regularly change groups and pairs around—especially in terms of learners’ first language, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic background and level of previous education—but in PBL this is not desirable. Group work is a crucial part of building trusting and cooperative learning environments, and engaging learners in ongoing self and peer evaluations. The group must be able to sustain itself and be unified for the life of the project. This is one of the more worrying aspects of using PBL with classes that have ongoing enrolments and exits.

During the initial group work, observe who works best with whom and note this. Make sure to have clear instructions for the task, and provide these to each learner or write them on the board. Reinforce these instructions as necessary. If necessary, demonstrate the activity, or aspects of the activity, before the learners do the activity. With PBL you could use produced ‘products’ of previous classes. If you have

videotaped the previous project presentations of other groups, show these to your current learners.

Always let the learners know when the group activity is to start and check if any clarification is needed. Try to consciously not be the centre of attention—move away from being ‘front and centre’. If appropriate, work with a number of groups to assist them complete the task, but only help when absolutely necessary.



I would highly recommend teachers undertake some classroom dynamics/group building activities to help develop this fundamental aspect of the PBL process. Hadfield (1992) has a series of activities that are indispensable in assisting the development of groups, group cohesion, group conflict resolution procedures and other group-based activities.²

Another important aspect of developing effective groups is to develop post-task procedures. At the completion of each part of the group work, or as necessary, signal the end of the task well before the task has been completed. Make sure to give learners time to reflect on the task itself (was it enjoyable / boring / useful / difficult?). Post-task evaluation form can be developed for learners to complete or a teacher could do this on the board. Evaluations can be as simple as the use of ‘smiley faces’ (beginners) or as complex as producing detailed oral written reports that explain and/or justify the decisions made by the group (advanced). It is important to keep the learners tracking their progress as they complete their projects.

Depending on the stage of the project and the level and purposes of the learners, it might also be useful to give learners time to think about what they have learned at regular stages throughout. Teachers can prepare some guided questions related to their objectives for doing the task. An extension of the Know/What/Learn (KWL) process comes to mind here: allow the learners to reflect on and state what they know, and want to know, about the topic of their project (K), what they previously learnt and what they now want to learn about their topic (W) and what they have learnt while doing the project (L).

It is also important to get learners into the habit of group role reflection. Give the learners time to think about how their group performed a task. This idea came as a result of a request

from a learner seeking to understand the cultural differences between her concepts of groups and group work and those of 'Australians'. Perhaps learners could be required to answer the questions after each group work session, (either privately or as a part of the group or as part of the class):

- Did everyone contribute?
- Was the task completed?
- What were the difficulties doing the task as a group?

For more suggestions on developing post-task reflective questions for group work, refer again to Hadfield (1992).³

The second part of the PBL process is to form the project groups. If a solid foundation for group work has been developed, the process for group work in PBL should be easier.

The third stage is then to select a topic. This has never been a problem in my experience, although the appropriateness of some topics has been! Learners have many ideas that they would like to investigate. Initially teachers will discern that some topics may be inappropriate for any number of reasons, but it is important for the learners to discover this for themselves. This is definitely an employability skill that I could continue to develop!

The fourth aspect of the PBL process is the planning of the project. This involves the group members allocating tasks and deciding and defining leadership roles. Timelines need to be developed, and the project questions / puzzles / problems need to be defined.

At this stage it may be important for teachers to develop a series of lessons on the development of research skills to help learners find, evaluate and use resources. Lessons on individual and group presentation skills may also be necessary along with the development and practice of time management skills.

The fifth component of the PBL process is the research itself. This is where the learners take more control. The teacher's role might be to assist with the finding, evaluating and using of resources. The points covered in the teaching required may need to be reiterated for specific circumstances. Skills such as locating, evaluating and synthesising resources may need to be further developed and practised. The sixth stage of the process is the development of the final 'product'. The learners may need reiteration of the points made previously relating to how to best present their findings. Again though, the group will decide! The seventh stage is the presentation of the PBL findings. This can be done in whatever manner the learners have decided.

The eighth and final necessary stage for the project to be successful is the feedback and evaluation stage. This

evaluation of the presented findings can be by teachers, peers, small groups, and by self-evaluation. The group can decide which form of evaluation they would like to receive—unless the evaluation is a component of a formal assessment process where this may be prescribed.

Project-based learning in action

To try to exemplify and flesh out the stages of PBL I've described, I'm going to share a PBL event. The class involved had a variable size of 19–28 learners on any given day. It was an intermediate class (ISLPR 1+/2). The learners in the class were from 17 different nationalities. Learners were a mix of genders; age (19–47); educational backgrounds (from a basic primary education through to tertiary education, including one medical doctor and a PhD in economics) and were from various economic and employment backgrounds (eg. psychiatric nurse, lawyer, student, farmer, waiter, process worker, teacher, data processor, labourer, administrative assistant, hotel manager, housekeeper, cook, doctor and lecturer). Initial needs analysis found that approximately two thirds of the class wanted to go on to further study, and one third wanted to find employment at the end of the program.

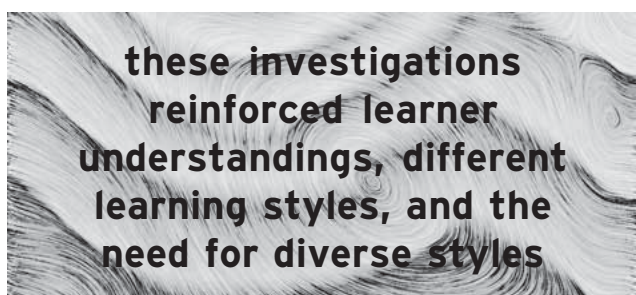
The practice of PBL was hindered by constraints that made preparation less than ideal. The class teacher was part-time (0.6) and this affected the time available to prepare the learners for the project. This also meant that continuity between lessons and the chance to more fully develop each area of the class bonding and class project preparation was not optimal. During the third and fourth weeks of the project a student teacher took this class as part of her practicum requirements. This meant that most of the project work was postponed until the beginning of the fifth week. The student teacher did not feel comfortable with the project work as she had had no preparation to do this work, and she felt that she would not be able to clearly lead the learners in the direction required as she would only be with them for two weeks.

Even though it had been predicted that there could be problems associated with class disruption (learners exiting and new learners joining), this was not such an issue for the following reasons:

- One entire group of learners (four in total) exited on or about the same time and therefore did not take part in the main component of the project.
- The groups that formed were large enough, (mostly five or six learners each), to manage the exit of one or even two learners from the group. The group members believed they would be able to satisfactorily complete the project.
- Concerns for new learners joining already formed project groups led to the addition of other generic skills.

The concepts of 'induction' and 'mentoring' were introduced, discussed and monitored.

- Another concern was for 'critical mass' needed for each group to maintain momentum. This was affected by movement into and out of each group. This was monitored by the teacher observing individual learner engagement, noting requests for teacher intervention and by content analysis of the completed tasks.
- The teacher closely tracked time management issues related to the project.
- The anticipated project outcomes and the CSWE 3 learning outcomes were mapped and outlined to learners involved in this project.



During the first two weeks of the process, the class did a number of bonding activities and learning style and language learning preferences. The bonding activities worked well to assist five new learners assimilate into the class. These activities were name games, name revisions, questionnaires and surveys done in groups and as a whole class about prior learning (qualifications) and prior learning experiences. This was extended by having learners interview each other about prior work experience and their feelings about those work experiences. Finally the class did a discussion task related to the reasons why the learners had migrated to Australia. Particularly relevant to these tasks was the importance of the post-activity information gathering and feedback. This helped the learners and teacher feel more at ease with each other.

During the second week, the class did two surveys, one about learning styles in general and the other about language learning preferences in particular. The learners then looked at previous research findings about what makes a good language learner (Rubin, 1975; Oxford, 1990). These investigations reinforced learner understandings, different learning styles, and the need for diverse styles to be noted by a group working together. When possible, teachers should exploit the strengths of idiosyncratic learning styles in their planning processes. Group formation, group process and group cohesion activities from Hadfield (1992) were presented so learners could further understand the manner in which groups operate, and decide upon and define roles in their groups.

Major highlights for the class were the presentations themselves, and the following lessons when the videoed presentations were replayed and evaluated. These learner evaluations focused on the quality of the presentation in terms of the content, the language used and other performance characteristics such as body language, eye contact, voice projection and the 'X' factor (overall performance and confidence).

The presentations did vary in quality, but in general each presenter easily satisfied the criteria for a related CSWE competency. Some presentations were appropriate for employment or further studies contexts. Perhaps more importantly, the total effect of each group's presentation was impressive, given the learners' limited experience with presenting information in this manner. The class teacher had asked the learners if any had ever given a class presentation previously, and none had. Most commented that this form of class group work and presentation had never been a part of their previous education.

Employability skills in project-based learning

Yates' (2005) analysis of the teaching of employability skills (sometimes known as 'generic' or 'soft' skills) is clear, simple and comprehensive. I think it is recommended reading for teachers of adult learners. The skills most evident in the PBL process, especially in the group formation and group reflection activities, were:

- Planning and organising skills
- Collecting, analysing and organising information skills
- Solving problems skills
- Communicating ideas and information skills
- Working with others and in teams skills
- Individual responsibility and autonomy skills.

An important aspect that Yates (2005) notes, is that these skills may need to be raised to the consciousness of the learner, and not be presumed to exist in the learners' minds. At the end of the project the learners articulated a similar list of practised skills. Learners noted that they practised:

- Working in a team
- Collecting information
- Research skills
- Analysis of information
- Negotiation skills
- Sharing ideas
- Problem-solving skills
- Organisational skills
- Planning skills
- Coordination skills
- Time management skills
- Presentation skills

- Communication skills
- Technology skills.

The learners also reported on practise in:

- Accepting different opinions
- Respecting others' attitudes
- Academic writing skills.

When asked about their motivation and what kept them motivated, these learners reported the following factors as being important:

- Interest in the topic
- Personal responsibility
- Helping others during the group work
- Working in a team and practising English
- Meeting the competency.

The learners expressed views on the effectiveness of their groups:

- It was good to be able to choose a topic and negotiate with others
- Time management was important
- Group members had a chance to express themselves
- Other learners listened to and respected different opinions
- Group members felt more confident
- Group members kept their promises
- Group members put in maximum effort
- Group members learnt to work together.

However, these learners also noted that:

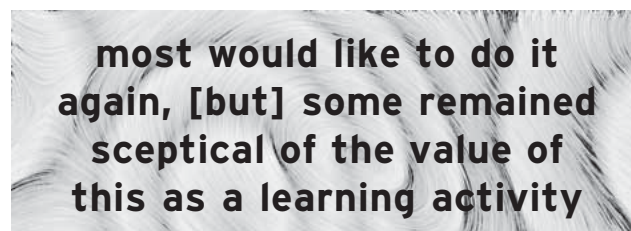
- Some members didn't come to school and finish their assigned tasks
- Sometimes there was too much independence and they could not organise themselves
- Sometimes a learner in the group did not participate.

Concerns were discussed, in groups of course—using the skills that had been previously learned throughout the PBL process.

From the teacher's perspective, the major highlight of this project was the way learners generated enthusiasm and maintained that enthusiasm throughout the preparation of the presentations. Despite the constraints mentioned, the learners remained positive during their regular group meetings. Most learners spent time out of class to meet and prepare.

Given their commitment and the impressive nature of the 'final products', learners obviously had worked cooperatively to complete what was required. The teacher's impression was that this group cohesion and positive group dynamic might not have existed without

the time-consuming preparation referred to, or without the sustained positive monitoring and feedback to learners about their efforts.



However some learners did decide not to participate. These learners were either late enrolments to the class, or were those who had worked with groups that had disbanded as a consequence of exiting class members. There were four such learners. These learners were engaged during the process by assisting the remaining learners in the remaining groups with their preparation. One of these learners practised using a video camera and then used this camera to record all of the presentations.

Although all learners indicated after the presentations that they had enjoyed the process, and that most would like to do it again, some remained sceptical of the value of this as a learning activity. This thinking may have been ameliorated if the learners had been given more immediate and comprehensible information about the relevance and importance of the employability skills being learnt, and the competencies being practised.

A future recommendation would be for the PBL process to commence as early as possible in the learning program, and for the learners to have more regular group meetings throughout the process. This is necessary for the reasons already mentioned, and because the learners needed to continually refocus on what needed to be done, especially since was the first time that any of them had attempted PBL of this kind.

Learners said they would have preferred to have had more class time for preparation, and that they would have liked to have had more and better examples of what a 'final product' looked like. More time may be needed for the actual presentation processes; for example, teaching appropriate body language/delivery skills; voice projection; use of transition signals and linking phrases; confidence-building; how to maintain eye contact; pronunciation; fluency, intonation, and speed and timing.

Possible PBL activities

It is best for the groups of learners to brainstorm their own topics or activities, but sometimes some learners find this difficult. For the keen PBL novice, I have included

just a few activities that learners may like to develop into projects:

- Planning, participating in, evaluating and reporting on an excursion.
- Planning, participating in, evaluating and reporting on a cross-class morning tea.
- News-based topics (for example, terrorism; the new industrial relations laws, natural disasters).
- Employment-based topics (for example, conditions of work in the Australian workplace, workplace agreements, casual conversation in the Australian workplace; employer-employee relations in the Australian workplace).

For PBL to be used to teach employability and/or language and literacy skills, it is imperative that the PBL process be carefully prepared. The teacher must prepare learners with activities and information relating to the formation of groups and group dynamics, the research process, the presentation of findings and the evaluation process. If the planning and preparation is carefully considered, learners will greatly benefit.

Martyn Brogan has taught a range of students in a range of contexts for a range of purposes since 1977.

Notes

- 1 Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry & Business Council of Australia, (2002), *Employability skills for the future*, Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training.
- 2 In Hadfield's book have a look at activities 3.1, 3.2, 3.3 for ideas about forming effective groups.
- 3 In particular look at activities 12.1 to 12.7 for ideas about evaluating a task, the learning and the group's performance.

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What do I do next?: literacy for a sustainable community

by Maree Keating

When a workplace closes after many years, retrenched workers are stranded on the edge of a job market that many have never entered before. Help often arrives when a union or another advocacy group mobilises the retraining and reskilling resources of the local TAFE and Centrelink office.

In this article, the writer describes how an Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) Innovative Literacy project has informed a support and advocacy project with a group of retrenched workers in the Western suburbs of Melbourne

Between June 2004 and the end of 2005 around 1500 Victorian workers lost their full-time, long-term jobs in the textile, clothing and footwear (TCF) industry. Over 18 months, I visited retrenched worker groups in about 40 workplaces. As a project officer for the Textiles Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia (TCFUA), my role was to help retrenched workers find out about the labour market they were about to enter and develop some immediate post-retrenchment strategies.

Most workers I spoke to had never formally applied for a job, signed on as unemployed, done any formal training, or seen a resume. Most were migrants and had been with the one company for at least 20 years. In many cases they depended on their work community for the exchange of knowledge and ideas, friendship networks and support. They faced many financial and other shocks. The sudden loss of the very community that had supported them through such shocks seemed to be one of the most disempowering aspects of their situation.

In 2004, the TCFUA won a grant from ANTA to develop and trial an innovative literacy strategy for retrenched TCF workers. The project was to develop a broad-based, literacy strategy and model, and to pilot literacy materials with a group of retrenched TCF workers as part of the process. The final project report was published on the DEET website in December 2005.¹

The research questions posed at the start of the project were:

- How do retrenched TCF workers currently access information about their training and employment options?
- What would relevant literacy development mean for this group of people in relation to their primary goal of finding work?

- What kind of partnerships would potentially improve their access to information, participation in relevant training and success in finding work that would make use of their skills?

The project itself took place in three parts:

- 1 A literature search, where we looked at the key issues emerging in relation to literacy skills, casualisation, retrenchment and preparation for work.
- 2 Phone interviews and focus groups with employers, job networks, Centrelink, TAFE and community provider staff, as well as retrenched workers themselves.
- 3 A pre-retrenchment pilot with a group of retrenched workers from Kennon, a textiles manufacturer in Preston, one of Melbourne's northern suburbs.

Retrenched TCF workers who were interviewed 'divided' into three main groups:

- Older workers who saw no option but an early retirement.
- Workers with a great capacity for hard work who continued to look for process work or manual labour which required no qualifications.
- Workers who were relatively young and fit enough to see retrenchment as an opportunity to get a certificate and move into other industries such as taxi driving, transport, security or aged care.

Each group experienced frustration and barriers, perhaps none more so than that middle group who were desperate to take almost any work to keep an income coming in, but found they couldn't get factory work because of their age or their accent. Some in the third group wanted to continue to work in factories while getting their qualifications.

Our project examined the accessibility and relevance of the current literacy provision and training available to retrenched TCF workers, the support available from employers, Job Networks and TAFE institutes, and the needs expressed by the retrenched workers themselves. What would be a useful advocacy strategy, training approach and partnership model for building an effective

response to the needs of retrenched TCF workers? How could we build on the strengths of the retrenched worker community itself in implementing that response? And what does literacy have to do with the support they need?

Castleton (2003) and Black (2002) raise questions regarding government rhetoric around literacy as a key issue in solving the skills shortages and changing workforce needs. They both suggest that discourses around improving workers' basic levels of 'literacy' are situating blame for unemployment on retrenched workers rather than governments. TCF workers know that language and literacy are not the primary skills required for the manufacturing work available to them. Yet interviews with retrenched workers and labour hire company representatives revealed that written testing procedures screened out applicants without a substantial level of formal education and/or English language reading and writing skills. Adaptability, relevant experience and/or knowledge were not the skills being tested.

Supporting training and partnerships

Literacy ... includes the cultural knowledge that enables a speaker, writer or reader to recognise and use language appropriate to different social situations *www.acal.edu.au*

Taking ACAL's definition of literacy as a starting point, the project officers developed an integrated literacy strategy with retrenched TCF workers that would:

- provide plenty of time for workers to process their situation and their options before they walk out the factory door
- develop partnerships between the organisations that could assist them
- find ways to follow up for several months with targeted support after retrenchment.

We worked with two groups of retrenched workers from Kennon over ten weeks, meeting them each for two hours a week between November and January. This involved time to express feelings, meet representatives from service providers and institutions, discuss the labour market and how it works, where the jobs are opening up, the nature of casual work, the changed industrial relations landscape, the reality of labour hire, how to use CVs, the internet, personal networks and the importance of staying connected to friends and colleagues.

Discussions explored people's attitudes and informal knowledge; they provided a forum in which workers could practice asking relevant questions of service providers and debate the answers they received in relation to alternative knowledge sources they had access to. Feedback showed that attitudes had shifted and confidence was up. Most

felt more prepared for the next step, and less afraid of accessing training and learning new things. Whilst they knew the labour market was grim, many felt they understood it and their options better, and could prepare themselves. They had shared these hard realities rather than doing it alone.



It became clear that coordinated follow-up support to these workers and information sharing between the TCFUA, local TAFEs, employers, Centrelink offices and Job Networks in each region would provide a basis for broad-based holistic support for groups of retrenched workers. Keeping retrenched workers together in a range of ways before and after retrenchment would be a vital part of the strategy.

Team-based knowledge exchange

From June 2005 all retrenched TCF workers were eligible for federally-funded customised assistance through Job Network. However, of the \$50 million put aside for this assistance package, virtually none had been spent at the time of writing this article. The problem is two-fold: retrenched workers and employers are not aware of the package or how to access it, and Job Network and Centrelink staffs are unaware of the package or how to implement it. Any broad-based literacy strategy needs to include ways to assist people to work their way through this system and find out what they need to know.

Job Network staff usually see TCF clients individually—they don't enter TCF workplaces before retrenchment dates to give out information. They tend not to perceive TCF retrenchees as workers emerging (somewhat traumatically) from a supportive work environment, and are generally unaware of the work ethic and the work environment from which these workers have come. Without sufficient knowledge of available assistance, Job Network staff have turned retrenched TCF workers away when they presented to discuss the assistance entitlements.

It became clear that Job Network and Centrelink staff need to enter workplaces as teams, giving one set of accessible information to groups of workers prior to the retrenchment date. In addition, retrenched workers needed time before the visit to work with a trainer to develop the confidence to ask questions and interpret responses about the system, so that they could access services which can otherwise seem

impenetrable. This kind of preparatory work was critical for workers to be able to work their way through the rules of the game and make strategic decisions.

At present, Job Network staff generally have limited awareness of what is being run by their community providers, or innovative TAFE-based courses such as child care courses run in first language, or ESL bridging courses for Aged Care. This knowledge exchange between TAFE, community providers and Job Networks is critical if Job Network case managers are to really assist retrenched TCF workers retrain for work. In the absence of such networks, retrenched workers need a way of finding out about the availability of these courses in the weeks and months following retrenchment.

TAFE has an important role to play in administering funded, targeted post-retrenchment assistance to the most vulnerable retrenched TCF workers. Retrenched workers in Victoria are eligible for up to 80 hours or roughly \$600 worth of retraining at a provider of their choice in the Office of Training and Technical Education-funded Skill Up program. In 2004, the TCFUA arranged TAFE meetings in workplaces immediately following retrenchment announcements, and encouraged TAFE providers to consider innovative and flexible ways of offering courses supporting TCF workers navigating the labour market.

The TCFUA encouraged Chisholm TAFE to design and run a tailored, literacy-based post-retrenchment course for a group of retrenched workers from Forbes Fashions in Dingley. The 50-hour course kept the workers together for six weeks after retrenchment. It covered broad study and computer skills, designed with their specific work and life goals in mind. During the course many of the retrenched workers did some casual factory work, but used the course to work out their future work and training options, develop some basic internet skills, and gain confidence as learners in a formal education setting. Most went on to further study as a result of the rapport built up between themselves and the teacher.

Keeping the community alive

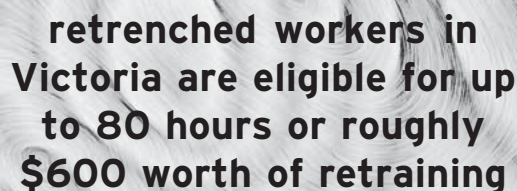
Following on from the 'What do I do Next?' project, the TCFUA provided intensive post-retrenchment support to 165 workers from Feltex Carpets in Braybrook, a western suburb of Melbourne. This current advocacy and support project is putting into practice some of the recommendations and findings from 'What do I do Next?'

In the three weeks leading to the retrenchment date we organised joint Centrelink/Job Network presentations to workers on site, and followed up these sessions with question and answer meetings run by the TCFUA. We

also organised VU, the designated Skill Up TAFE provider, to deliver group information and one-on-one assessments for all retrenched workers.

Immediately following retrenchment, we visited most of the Job Networks in the western suburbs and decided to advocate the use of one—YesWest—to the workers. We briefed the YesWest staff about the federal assistance package and their obligations to the retrenched Feltex workers. We sent letters to all the workers and invited them to information sessions to discuss their next steps. Between October and Christmas 2005, we held three public meetings with different worker groups, introducing them to the YesWest Job Network staff and VU teachers. Many questions were asked and many debates were had about the value of training, the availability of jobs, and the services provided by YesWest.

After the meetings, about 50 people joined YesWest to receive their customised assistance to find work. According to YesWest, the only work available was casual and generally poorer paid with worse conditions than the retrenched Feltex workers were used to. Around 30 workers (mainly men under 45) undertook short courses at VU, in areas such as earth-moving, taxi-driving, forklift and truck driving. It is yet to be seen whether the certificates lead to new or desirable work opportunities. A few women enrolled in longer courses such as aged care certificates or ESL for 2006.



**retrenched workers in
Victoria are eligible for up
to 80 hours or roughly
\$600 worth of retraining**

Other workers wanted to take a break, have a holiday or take more time to consider what next. Some wanted to retire. Older women talked about caring for grandchildren. There were about 15 workers on Workcover prior to retrenchment, most of whom would not be eligible for a disability pension. The TCFUA has employed a community artist to work with some of these workers individually, to listen to and record their stories.

Throughout 2006, the TCFUA is planning to set up regular learning groups where retrenched Feltex workers can enrol in a course run by the TCFUA's own registered training organisation to share experiences, learn new skills, find out about services and programs that exist in the community, and support one another through the period of change.

Continued on page 26...

A RAW experience: student publications and the CGEA

You can have something close to intellectual bliss when a learning task is interesting, *and* fun. (“Bah!” mutters the curmudgeon, brandishing his copy of *Australian Book Review*. “There’s a symphony by Mahler ...”). Seriously, when a project-based activity has everyone working in that ideal state of relaxed concentration, the learning takes care of itself. This article is an example.

If student publications are not concerned with the juxtapositioned ideologies at the heart of reading and writing, if they do not concern themselves with issues such as how decisions are made, who has control, and whose language is used, then the publishing process will just be another domesticating exercise in which the writers are again expected to conform. This expectation to conform holds up a certain kind of value-laden, mainstream English and says, “This is better than yours”. If those of us earning our living in the ALBE field do this, we are devaluing the writers’ intelligence, their lives and their worth.¹

When I began preparing for a Practical Matters workshop presentation,² I revisited Carmel Jennings’s article (1995) and found that quote. In reflecting on my own experiences of student publishing over a long period of time, Jennings quote echoed my feelings on the processes, development of skills, impact of technological changes and positive outcomes both for individual students and the organisation. I identified some of the common threads in how we regard newsletters and student writing, and the intrinsic value of publishing, whether it is in-class, in-organisation or community and beyond. Giving people an opportunity to express themselves and have their voice heard has a powerful effect on their sense of identity and connectedness.

I found in my cupboard copies of a student newspaper *The Red Sun* produced at Epping High School in 1979 with my Year 7–9 media studies elective. In those heady days as a young teacher I was keen to negotiate with the students the production of the newspaper, and so they had roles like in a regular newspaper—editor, cartoonist, reporters, advice columnist. The paper was typed on an old typewriter and printed on roneo sheets. Our very tolerant principal did not censor a near-naked woman in the cartoon and an article on the Lindy Chamberlain case tested the boundaries, but it was the students’ work that was valued. Five years later my STC (Year 12 alternative HSC) English class produced ‘Our Age’ with colour stencils and slightly better quality typing, plus a few photographs to add interest. These

‘artefacts’ help to illustrate how student writing can be published simply and effectively, but I also remember the process as being inclusive and student-driven.

I used these artefacts along with other publications as part of a ‘show and tell’ to begin the Ballarat Practical Matters workshop. This prompted some discussion of their own experiences of producing publications at school or in other situations. I then asked participants to consider and list the range of journals and newsletters that they received and read currently: professional journals such as *Fine Print* and *Literacy Link*, sporting clubs and special interest groups, school, workplace and local community newsletters.

I then drew up a chart on the whiteboard to look at the ‘5 W questions’ of:

- 1 What newsletters, papers and journals do you read?
- 2 When do you read them?
- 3 Who produces them?
- 4 Why do you read them?
- 5 Where do you read them?

This was used to look at categories and similarities/differences to see what patterns were evident. We then discussed the range of publications and the variations in voice, tone, presentation and style that reflected the cultural and social situating of each publication. It was interesting to ask the question ‘where do you read?’ as we found that the local paper or school newsletter tended to float around the kitchen bench or the coffee table, whereas the newsletter from the sporting club or special interest group found its way into the bedroom for late night perusal. (Where does *Fine Print* live at your place?)

The question of ‘what do we keep and why?’ was raised with the somewhat extreme example of a man in the UK who had kept every edition of the magazine from the *Sunday Times* for 30 years or more. With the advent of electronic newsletters will there be such evidence in 30



M. Hanrahan

years? Do people read as much online as they do in hard copy? These are questions to explore with younger students who are more inclined to subscribe to e-zines and spend more time online. So why embark on producing a print-based student newsletter?

The development of RAW, a student newsletter

The first edition of RAW was produced in 1998 with one basic computer in the classroom, using Publisher and clip art and printed on the office photocopier. This was wholly teacher-published with help from a student to learn the basics of Publisher. It seemed a good way to motivate the mostly older male students to write. A Fitzroy supporter in the group came up with the title RAW (Reading and Writing) with a lion and book as a nice ironic play on words for the masthead graphics. A few more editions were produced over the next couple of years in this way. Then in 2000 the new digital camera was used so that images of students and activities could be included, and some ESL students contributed their writing. The students began to see the production of RAW as a valued and regular part

of their ALBE class and took on roles in decision-making on content, editing and typing.

In 2001, the Carlton Reading and Writing Centre (as it was then called) set up a computer room with internet access so that images and text from the internet could be included in RAW, and more students from other classes were encouraged to contribute. The teachers were using RAW as part of class reading material, and students were encouraged to read aloud their own writing or that of other students. RAW was used as part of the initial interview and assessment selection of texts as it gave prospective students an insight into the centre and its community.

In 2002, the September edition of RAW had an Adult Learners' Week focus with more students having input and the outsourced printing funded by a grant. More copies meant a wider circulation and students visiting from Williamstown for ALW were given copies, as were the committee of management and others attending the centre throughout the week.

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In 2003 a new masthead with the Carlton Neighbourhood Learning Centre logo was designed and the lion disappeared (alas, so had the student). A specifically focused publications class was set up with designated roles and an editorial committee structure. The typing and design work was now done by students with assistance from the teacher, and the final edit was done by a volunteer with desktop publishing expertise.

The standards for quality and content and regular production—four editions per year—were now in place and in the hands of the students. Regular features included an interview with a member of the committee or from the staff, or with a person connected with the centre in some other way. An ex-AFL footballer accountant and an 85-year-old founder of the neighbourhood house were two popular choices. The interview questions were devised by the group with the interview taped and transcribed or else sent via email for a written response. A student profile became another regular feature, and the selection spread equally across classes and for gender balance. The word puzzle on the back page was popular with students and their families.

The publications class worked with the CGEA General Curriculum Options, and it was made explicit from the start that learning outcomes related to the work done producing the newsletter and other publications for the centre. The class became more of a workshop as tasks were allocated to students according to their skills, and new skills were developed ‘just in time’. The staff at the centre began to think in terms of using the publications workshop like a print shop and fed in requests on a regular basis so that skills were acknowledged and appreciated. Promotional flyers, flow charts, signs and learning aids were produced along with RAW. This was a truly collaborative and experiential learning model and the students responded positively. It was a small group which enabled much one-to-one teaching, teacher-to-student, student-to-student and student-to-teacher interactions!

The region’s inaugural Adult Learners Week short story writing competition was embraced by all, and was entered by a number of students with successful prize winners and publication of all entries in RAW. All the stories were printed with minimal editing as the individual voices were valued equally. At this stage the GCO learning outcome, ‘Can identify, analyse and apply the practices of culture’, was particularly relevant, and at each subsequent editorial meeting referred to and reinforced as the students came to value the many voices of the student writing.

New computers, a digital camera and a photocopier meant the quality of RAW was further enhanced, and by 2004 there was ‘whole of program’ input with four issues of ten pages each. The core publications group continued to manage production with assistance from the teacher. The Adult Learners Week short story writing competition was again entered by a number of students and their stories were published.

In 2005 students were involved in all stages of production of RAW, producing promotional flyers, signage and learning materials for the centre and others. Students in the group became competent in using MS Word, Clip Art, MS Publisher, Photoshop, Paint, internet searching and saving images and text, transferring files on the network, using a scanner, digital camera, photocopier and laminator. They were involved in planning, organising and publicising the Adult Learners Week program and conducted a Carlton Mystery Walk for the visiting students from Williamstown.

The timeline for the production of RAW, around eight to ten weeks, and the need to get tasks done was an ever-present pressure. The students were able to take responsibility for different parts of the production and collaboratively develop the skills needed. Their independence in managing tasks increased to the point where they would work unsupervised, come in specially, or complete work in their own time.

As well as meeting the requirements of the CGEA General Curriculum Options, the publications workshop model embodied the principles of Learning to Learn:

Learning to Learn activities address processes which enable learners to operate with greater independence, confidence, autonomy and self direction in learning and in life.

Effective adult learning programs attend to the development of learning to learn skills, by enabling learners to study learning processes (how) they learn best, in addition to the content (what) being delivered.

Learning to Learn activities can offer learners:

- an improved generic skills base
- increased development in self directed or independent learning
- more selective and effective use of resources to enhance learning and life
- increased opportunity to engage in critical and reflective practice
- enhanced organisational skills

Practical Matters

- increased opportunity and confidence to network, team build and collaborate with others.

Learning to Learn activities explicitly direct the learner's attention to their capacity to organise themselves, their resources and their time. These activities link the management of a learning program to the practice of it.³

I believe that the RAW experience illustrates the many benefits of publishing student writing by:

- encouraging reluctant writers/learners
- giving students 'voice'
- providing relevant and interesting reading material
- showcasing learning and achievements
- validating skills, experience and intelligence
- celebrating diversity
- promoting programs and the centre with its community.

Much of this journey has involved trial and error and relied on the willingness of students to participate and take on responsibilities. The following points are worth considering for those interested in setting up a similar student publication within their educational program/provider:

A successful publication could/should:

- Be student-centred and produced collaboratively
- Build on existing skills and knowledge
- Be planned with a thematic approach and some predictable content
- Have varied visual and graphic content
- Be student controlled/determined regarding content and format
- Have regular meetings to discuss content, articles, items for inclusion
- Reflect student voices: light editing for clarity rather than 'perfect' English
- Follow protocols on privacy/copyright issues; for example, naming writers, permission for images
- Be mindful of the use of stereotypes and 'isms' and encourage student decision-making about what will be deemed acceptable or unacceptable

- Balance production quality issues with the students' sense of ownership
- Be launched with public fanfare to allow willing students to read their work aloud
- Develop a 'whole-of-centre' awareness of the production timeline to encourage contributions
- Provide opportunities for feedback
- Encourage teacher-planned learning activities around text—find the information, critical questions
- Produce extra copies for display and wider distribution to other agencies, committee of management, local cafes
- Be reviewed often
- Be backed with commitment, passion, energy and ideas to keep it going!

There is great value in producing a student newsletter. It provides a strong focus for developing a whole range of skills and, in particular, computer skills. There is the opportunity to set up a workshop approach to teaching and learning. The RAW experience at CNLC has been very successful in these areas. It has been a multi-layered and rewarding journey.

Lynne Matheson has worked in adult literacy education for the past decade, while in her previous working life she was a secondary English/Drama/Media Studies teacher in the state system in the northern suburbs. She has always been passionate about writing and exploring the links between voice and identity

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- 1 Jennings, Carmel (1995), 'Written out and scribbling in: publishing the work of adult literacy readers and writers', in *Good Practice*, n.p., April.
- 2 VALBEC Practical Matters Workshop; Ballarat, July 2005.
- 3 Hodge, R. (2000), *Learning to Learn: ARIS information sheet*, Language Australia.

Open Forum

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

Traralgon Neighbourhood Learning House's educational program, *Making our Community Computer Literate*, was equal third prize winner in ACFE's Support for Quality Non-Accredited Teaching and Learning Awards. Jenny Poon tells us more about they work they do. And in Melbourne, Lynne Matheson braved the blustery autumn weather to bring back the latest from the annual VALBEC conference.

Making our community computer-literate

Commencing approximately 16 years ago, the Traralgon Neighbourhood Learning House (TNLH) offered basic computer classes to individuals in the community who wanted to increase their knowledge of computer programs or begin to understand how to use a computer as a word processor. Even though information technology has advanced so far in what seems such a short time, the TNLH still finds there is a target group of people who are still extremely wary of computers, and who seek very basic computer skills.

Many of those who come to TNLH and inquire about computer classes are in the older age brackets and have had an old computer (often much in need of an upgrade, mind you!) gifted to them by their adult children. The prospect of being able to keep in contact with family members living in other states or even overseas through emails has often been the prompt for these older learners to seek out classes that will make them conversant in computer language.

Many of us take the wonder of technology for granted when we walk into workplace and/or home office and press the 'on' button. We confidently wait for the computer to



load and then begin checking our inbox and browse the internet for an e-bay item or to make a bank transaction to pay the bills. For many community members this is not an action easily taken, or in fact looked upon as a necessary part of everyday life. But with many computers now in use in Job Networks, pharmacies and in most places of employment, the emphasis on keeping up-to-date with information technology is now a mandatory basic need, particularly for those of us who want at least to be able to understand what form an address it is when it's written as *www.whatever.at.au!*

Catch phrases that seem to work when advertising basic computer classes are "Computers for the terrified" or "Show your computer who's boss". The marketing hook suggests to reluctant or fearful learners that a computer can in fact be tamed and made to speak your language—if the learner can get over the fear and worry that he/she may accidentally damage some 'vital' component that makes the computer work.

Our objective at TNLH in providing computer classes is to show people that pressing a delete button is actually a very early step in the process of becoming computer literate, and that a mouse is not a nocturnal creature that feeds on the cheese we leave in mousetraps. For this reason our

beginner classes consist of learning to control the mouse through playing card games that are already loaded as software on the computer. Without the participant necessarily realising it, they are becoming very competent in the hand/eye skills that in time will see them ably traversing the web seeking out sites of interest.

Our success can be measured by the constant demand for computer classes that are basic and not intimidating, nor too overwhelming for those participants who venture to enrol. At present the TNLH offers up to 17 computer classes per week. These classes cover computer skills from the very basic right through to intermediate levels of Microsoft Access and Excel.

Jenny Poon has been working as coordinator for the past 16 years. She is very passionate about Neighbourhood Houses, and in Traralgon the centre is bulging to the



seams with fun-loving people and lots of laughter. Jenny has nine wonderful grandchildren and hopes to continue working until her retirement in five years.

RitHre RitNow VALBEC conference, May 2006

On a typically cold, blustery Autumn day in Melbourne, 156 delegates converged on the William Angliss Conference centre for the annual VALBEC conference. Visitors from ACT, NSW, Queensland and Tasmania joined delegates from across the width and breadth of Victoria. A total of 20 sessions gave attendees plenty of choice and variety. There was depth and strong educational foundation in the program that challenged and provoked discussion and thought.

The title of the conference gave some people confusion but after they had experienced the day it all made sense ... “yeah, right!” As in years past, the High Impact team began the day with a humorous look at adult literacy and numeracy with a game show format that encouraged audience participation and embarrassment.

Keynote speaker Sharon Brown deconstructed the conference by-line in an evocative and warmly conveyed address:

In order to survive in today's globalised world, it has become necessary for all people to learn new literacies and develop the ability to locate, evaluate and effectively use information in multiple manners ¹

Sharon encouraged people to consider that learners must ‘thrive’ rather than merely survive, and that by giving recognition and value to identity and community connections we optimise opportunities for effective



learning to occur. Using the powerful metaphor of a speeding train to describe the globalised world and the technology that we all are forced to engage with, she was able to position the various roles of learners, teachers and workers in this rapidly changing landscape. Her



presentation was very grounded and affirming and set the tone for the day.

A regular presenter at the conference, Merv Edmunds, had his audience spellbound with a presentation on 'Why humans dream'. There were several presentations of research projects and people were invited to give input and consider the direction of ACFE research projects in a follow-on from last year's presentation. A range of practical sessions gave people ideas and stimulus to try different approaches, and of particular interest were the pod-casting and blogs demonstrated by Michael Coghlan and Delia Bradshaw. The session based on essay writing was very much appreciated and attendees' comments indicated how thorough and professional Pauline Morrow and Lydia Interlandi were in putting their session together.

During the day, Debbie Soccio took images to create a digital story aimed at documenting the conference. She

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We had a barbecue in December and about 20 Feltex workers came. People told stories about arriving in Australia with nothing, miserable and wanting to go home, and how they decided to stay because of the friendships they formed at work. Others told stories of how factory work had damaged their health but left them with a huge number of friends despite this. We hope that we will be able to make space for a community to be recreated despite the atomising effects of retrenchment, casual work practices, and incoherent service provision.

Perhaps a community, forged through a lifetime of working together, is the most valuable resource available to the retrenched workers as they find their way to their next step.

Maree Keating is a qualified ESL and adult literacy teacher of many years experience. She works on research and advocacy projects with the Textiles Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia and is doing her PhD on changing



was able to use these images in her workshop and then put the final presentation to music and commentary to present at the final review session. The review session was most satisfying in the immediate feedback it provided while also focusing attention on the areas that VALBEC needs to remain active. There were some interesting suggestions for events—party, dinner, play—for the forthcoming 30 years celebrations in 2008. All up, it was a great day filled with talk and laughter, serious considerations, motivation and inspiration.

Lynne Matheson is the VALBEC conference convenor and the VALBEC president.

Note

- 1 *United Nations Action Plan, 2003–2012 Literacy decade, United Nations 2002, p. 4.*

global work regimes and sustainable local communities at RMIT.

Notes

This article was first published in the June 2006 edition of *Literacy Link*. The Fine Print editorial committee thanks ACAL and Maree for permission to reprint.

- 1 The full report on the project can be found on the DEST LiteracyNet website: www.dest.gov.au/literacyNet/documents/What_do_I_do_%20next?.pdf

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Policy Update

Putting ACE research to work: ACE research strategy for 2005-07

Adult, Community and Further Education has established three Circles of Professional Research Practice to maximise research benefits while also examining ways to foster a research culture and capability within the organisation. ACFE's Cheryl Wilkinson talks about three high-level ACFE-funded research projects that have been complemented by these Circles.

Research plays an important role in an evidence-based approach to policy and program development. Research informs the Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE) Board's policy development, strategic planning and resource allocation. It also functions as a positive tool for change. All research projects must be designed such that the adult community education (ACE) sector can contribute to them and benefit from them by increasing capability of practitioners and the capacity of ACE organisations.

Research helps determine the extent to which the goals of the ministerial statement on ACE are being addressed in the field including:

- engaging whole communities in learning
- working in partnership with each other and other community organisations to develop and deliver programs and services that meet local needs
- building stronger communities by identifying and addressing local learning needs
- addressing needs of specific groups of learners
- enhancing the sustainability of ACE through improving both individual ACE practitioner capability and organisational practice.

Since 2002, the ACFE Board has invested in three major pieces of high-level research. These are:

- 1 The ACE experience: pedagogies for life and employment (Victoria University).
- 2 Men's learning through ACE and community involvement in small rural towns (University of Ballarat).
- 3 The ACE longitudinal study.

The research reports are available at <http://www.acfe.vic.gov.au/abtresearch.htm>

The ACE experience (Victoria University)

This research was a joint Victoria University and ACFE board project to investigate teaching and learning practices within ACE classrooms. The aim was to learn

whether and in what ways the 'pedagogical culture' of teaching in that sector might support or facilitate the development of generic skills amongst learners. It set out to document and analyse models and cases of 'good practice' pedagogy to develop a theoretical framework for the kind of pedagogical practices that are identified with the ACE sector and known to be effective.

The report shows that ACE practitioners draw on a wide range of strategies, approaches and pedagogies to foster and nurture generic skills development. These skills and approaches are intrinsic to and connect with the cultures that characterise ACE centres, ACE environments and ACE places—what the report calls, 'the pedagogies of pLACE'. The unique educational and social contribution of the ACE sector can be found in the intersection and interaction between pedagogies of personal engagement, and pedagogies of 'the pLACE'.

Men's learning and community involvement (University of Ballarat)

This research project was developed as a result of earlier work contracted by the ACFE Board, 'Sustainable ACE provision in remote and rural communities in Victoria', which identified that participation in ACE by males was significantly below that of females in small rural towns, and that around three quarters of ACE participants in Australia are women.

This project's aim was to investigate where, what and how adult males prefer to learn in small rural communities—both through providers funded to deliver ACE, and through community-owned and managed organisations. It does so through a survey of men involved in ACE organisations, Country Fire Authority, Landcare, senior citizens, football clubs and, as a recent extension of the research, in Men's Sheds. The broader aim of this research was to better meet the needs of adult male learners in and beyond ACE, especially in rural and remote areas where there are few educational options available for men to engage with structured learning.

It challenges ACE providers to more effectively meet rural men's learning through creating more learning situations where men are already 'at home' and/or via practical, hands-on activity. The research confirms the need for ACE providers in these settings to recognise and break down the perceived and persistent barriers that lack of enjoyment and limited early experiences of learning at (and also beyond) school can and do create for many men over a lifetime.

The ACE longitudinal study

The ACE longitudinal study follows student destinations over three years, including those of priority learner groups identified in the ministerial statement on ACE. The study provides unique information on the destination of ACE learners over three years, including patterns of participation in relation to a range of social and demographic variables. It will identify longer-term outcomes and the benefits of ACE.

Stage 2, *'ACE CONNECTS! Building pathways to education, employment and community engagement'*, was completed in 2005. It provides evidence of the key role of ACE as an access point to learning and employment for a wide range of people, including those learner groups specified for priority in the ministerial statement on ACE. In particular, it demonstrates the benefits to learners—many of whom have not undertaken structured learning for many years—in terms of further study, employment and community participation pathways. Stage 3 is underway in 2006.

Circles of Professional Research Practice

In 2005 the Board established three statewide Circles of Professional Research Practice. Their purpose is to maximise

... continued from page 5

needs by continuously trying things out, evaluating and adapting. This is research at its finest.

Rosemary McKenry has taught in Victoria, the Kimberley region of Western Australia and Papua-New Guinea. In partnership with the Goulburn Valley Aboriginal Consultative Group, she wrote *Deadly eh Cuz! Teaching speakers of Koori English*, published in 1996 by Language Australia. At present Rosemary teaches part-time at Bendigo Regional Institute of TAFE.

Note

1Astle, David. "Like, whatever..." in Sunday Life supplement, *Sunday Age*, 4 Sept. 2005, pp18–19.

the practical benefit of high-level research for ACE organisations and support the implementation of the ministerial statement at regional and local levels. The Circles are led by professional researchers, coordinated by ACE organisations and made up of interested ACE organisations and practitioners. They explore the most recent research projects funded by the Board:

- The ACE experience: pedagogies for life and employment (Victoria University).
- Men's learning through ACE and community involvement in small rural towns (University of Ballarat).
- The ACE longitudinal study.

This initiative is generating insight into how a research culture and capacity might be fostered within the ACE sector. The model of the Circle has been confirmed as a valuable one and promising outcomes are emerging. The Circles are due to report to the ACFE Board in June. The concept is generating strong interest in the ACE sector and beyond. The board is extending this initiative in 2006 to a second round to enable more ACE organisations to participate and later stages of the Board's research program to be explored.

Cheryl Wilkinson is senior project officer in the community and stakeholder relations branch of the ACFE Division. Her public sector education and training experience includes disadvantaged schools program consultancy, adult education and community outreach services in TAFEs and nine years of executive support to the Southern Western Port Regional Council of ACFE.

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Foreign Correspondence

The wonder of China: or how to fall in love with one billion and three hundred million people

China, like Africa, can take you beyond yourself in ways you thought existed only in other people's dreams. And despite being earth-bound as a teacher of the dry-as-dust-sounding Certificate of English for Business and Global Communication, Snezana Dabic lets her heart and soul fly free, taking the reader with her.

Should silence be
the universal language
if man recognizes
the inner light
is
One?
From 'A journey to Babel' by Chou Ping¹

The poet's question is philosophical, perhaps exuding hope for some universal human bond, however utopian it may sound, or sentencing poets to a silent exile, the ultimate condemnation for those whose power lies in words. It would be difficult to accept a wordless, voiceless world, for how would we express and admire the beauty of hundreds of languages with their dramatic-sounding or visual landscapes with whole cultures and peoples nestling in them? How would we communicate a business deal or a love message across the globe? If silence were a 'universal language', how would a poet scream in anger, agony or ecstasy? How would a baby learn beyond touch and smile, or a rebel demand freedom? And how would we all learn and teach what has been transmitted by sounds, symbols and scripts from time immemorial?

I cast my vote against the language of silence in favour of the African music and passionate words of hope I heard in the poorest township on the Cape Good Hope, the deep sacred



sound of Aboriginal didgeridoo in a Melbourne pub, irresistible and blissful Serbian Gypsy songs from the Balkans, ecstatic dance ritual and the scream of Afro-Brazilian band Olodum in Salvador, glorious Russian chanting of the ancient echoes, entrancing verses of 'Ramayana' sung to an Indian raga on a gentle stringed instrument vina, and elusive gourd-flute melodies accompanying Naxi singers in *Dongba*² language spoken in *Lijiang* at the foothill of the Chinese Himalayas. Each one of them tells a story about creation, life's hardships, spirits and gods, heaven and hell, love lost or found.

If it were not for the language, I and countless others would probably never be able to travel to China to work and live through some enchanting, life-changing experiences. The English language, spoken and written with its complete cultural packaging, is what some of us teach in many Chinese universities; more precisely, Certificate of English for Business and Global Communication³, a course that prepares Chinese students for global citizenship. But our teaching role would be rather impoverished if we understood it narrowly and perhaps too traditionally as passing on information and knowledge of and about the language. Also, it would be unwise to see oneself only as a teacher, even with a capital 'T', given the reverence local students show us, because travelling to China to stay for an extended period of time transforms the teacher into a keen learner, curious traveller, a humble foreigner who becomes a new person with a thousand shape-shifting identities.

The Chinese classroom may just be the right place where we can eagerly attempt to understand, perhaps for the first time in our life, the mystery of that gigantic space, *Zhongguo* or the 'Middle Kingdom', and its people who once upon a time believed they lived at the centre of the world. The first meeting with students may end up in a culture shock for both sides, leaving us perplexed and concerned about teaching and learning. That modest space, usually defined by a long dusty blackboard, concrete floors and windows that do not close even in freezing temperatures, is the place where East meets West. Not a typical East nor a common West, but both extraordinary in what they have to offer to each other.



Often 40 or 50, if not more, pairs of eyes stare at you in astonishment as you pace in front of the rows of desks, fixed to the floor, and try to introduce yourself and your subject in plain English. After repeating yourself several times, you realise that their reaction will not change no matter what you do. Rather than get desperate, you choose to become an enthusiastic, quick learner, trying to read their eyes and bodies, even if they give you no feedback (what a magic word!) and no amount of words, gestures and mimicking may help. Perhaps not on the first day, for reconditioning takes time and repetition, and that first day only marks the beginning of a very special relationship. Habits are deeply ingrained in our brains and bodies and change hardly ever happens instantly. Above all, it may be complex and threatening.

Thus, the reconditioning is mutual. For the teachers it means awareness and understanding of cultural differences, the long history of the country and its diverse peoples, the awesome body of philosophies and mythologies from which the Chinese way of thinking and education system stem with all their learning and teaching strategies. It also means not making assumptions or judging the learners because of their silence, no eye contact or inability to give you the answer that you consider to be the right one. For the students it means opening up to new styles of acquiring skills and knowledge, being flexible, learning to ask questions, of not being afraid of making a mistake or losing face, volunteering answers and

willingly accepting change. For rejection of change can cause grief and hostile feelings on both sides, slowing down the learning and teaching processes and harming this educational and cultural collaboration out of which, in the final analysis, we all emerge transformed.

Generally speaking, unless we are well prepared for the new experiences we may feel frustrated and annoyed, clinging to our preconceived ideas, having false impressions and often misunderstanding our new learners and their culture or cultures—for there are almost 60 officially recognised ethnic groups in China today⁴, although 95 percent is Han-Chinese. Since our students are young adults with their own ideas of the world and life and a vulnerable sense of honour, one way of avoiding confusion and misapprehension may be by explaining the reasons for our actions—the differing roles of teachers in China and Australia, why their expectations may not be met, why our styles of presentation and instruction are diverse and wide-ranging—by clarifying, putting into context and elaborating on everything we do in the classroom to help them understand that we are not talking about the clash of cultures but rather an integration of different strategies and approaches to education. In this process it seems that we carry more responsibility than the students, for they know less about our world than we do about theirs. Along the way we may learn something about reconciling our own rigid patterns and prejudices that are ripe for change, because our way may not be the best or the only way.

At the same time, we may want to consult Chinese colleagues about their methods and modes of lecturing and teaching, perhaps to compare styles and remember our lessons, regardless of whether we agree or not with our counterparts. Moreover, we could seek ideas and answers from the students on important issues and topics one needs to know while living and working in China. Such attitude would give them confidence, a sense of responsibility and perhaps a certain gladness that they are not there just to listen and learn, but to teach us as well—to teach us about their diverse customs, important Mandarin words such as *ganbei* ('cheers' in the



'bottoms up' manner of toasting), about the sensitive social etiquette used when greeting each other, about old and new myths and rituals permeating modern lifestyle; to help us master eating with chopsticks (which have been in use for over 3000 years); to tell us about the loneliness of the last 25 generations who have grown up without brothers or sisters, to demonstrate why they like *wushu*⁵ martial arts of the Shaolin Temple; to take us up the Lao Shan mountain which is guarding the affluent city of Qingdao with its seven sharp peaks along the coastline of the Yellow Sea and a Taoist monastery where the monks grow green tea; to take us for a stroll on the crenellated Great Wall, or to the prehistoric Stone Forest near Kunming in the beautiful southwest province of Yunnan. That is how those timid and reticent young people, dressed like any other student in a western country, with colourful hairdos, low-cut jeans and inevitable shimmering mobiles, become your enthusiastic guides and keen storytellers.

The fragile bond established on the first day in the classroom over the weeks becomes a myriad of sparks in their eyes and an exhilarating tickle in your heart. You may teach them how to write a *resume* in English in case they travel overseas for a job, and they show you how to make dumplings; you instruct them in the skill of public speaking and its preferred style in western countries, and they explain to you why there are 40 million more men than women in their country today; you guide them in the use of present perfect tense and its relation to time, and they take you to a teahouse to sip chrysanthemum or snow flower tea; you insist on getting feedback during the lesson, and they point to Confucius and his rigorous teaching on discipline and quiet group listening; but if you keep them too long in class, you'll hear how Confucius would let the students go when a burning incense stick turned into ashes; if you ask them to debate an argument, they'll point out the effortless discussion style and harmony of Taoism; you may analyse and sing with them John Lennon's 'Imagine', and they may teach you to sing a love song, 'The Moon is My Heart' in Putonghua (Mandarin); you demonstrate a traditional Yang style *tai chi*⁶ and they stage a *kung fu*⁷ sparring in the classroom; you recite a traditional Yoruba poem 'Hunger' and make them smile, and they tell you a story of how the giant Pan Gu (P'an Ku) created the world by separating the sky from the earth and how people emerged from the insects on his body; you ask them to help you bargain when buying a priceless jade crane and they present you with a magnificent painting of terraced golden rice fields.

Then, you ask them to explain the meaning of the word *guanxi*⁸ and give them a boring homework to write, but they shout: "Enough! Let us take you out to see, taste and touch our life!" Amazed but happy, you agree. So in pairs or groups, less often individually, they take you to a thousand and one places, from a computer market to a tea shop, from a Buddhist temple to a Beijing opera, to buy an iPod or sample a lotus tea, to light a gigantic incense stick in a sacred courtyard or admire the costumes of opera singers, for your untrained ear may not



know how to appreciate Chinese high-pitched traditional operatic voices.

You may want to go for a bike ride along a dusty road and experience the petrol-fried rapes-sewer-pineapple-chilli-smelling pollution as well as see the amazing skill of pedestrians and drivers to move in waves of perfect harmony without ever bumping into each other—you, as a foreigner, are most likely to disrupt the balance by stopping unexpectedly. Or you may wish to go for a walk in a peaceful park where ordinary people come to play mah-jong⁹ when they retire or lose their jobs; a solitary musician plays pipa¹⁰ or a double-reed flute, oblivious to everything around him; artists sit together, write and draw calligraphic verse, willows and birds or invisible mountains; a toothless grandmother holds a baby to do her job on the grass, right in front of the sign, 'Keep off!'

Your young guides would relax and enjoy telling you about their villages somewhere under the clouds, a bustling city where they were born or a province they'd love to visit one day, because China is beautiful. If they could, they'd visit Shanghai to see miraculous new architecture on the Bund, hovering above the antiquated traditional wooden houses with upturned eaves and gables pointing to the heaven, or they'd go to Xian to inspect thousands of terracotta warriors that the legendary ruthless Emperor Qin Shi Huangdi¹¹ had taken with him into death, all buried in a mausoleum built by 700,000 castrated labourers, to guard him in the afterlife. The students tell you all this in their slightly 'broken' English, asking you to correct them and check their pronunciation. But you frequently

disregard their request, just to make them talk without being interrupted, like the Yangtze River flows into the East China Sea, to give them a chance to say things that they would never dare in front of the whole class. Sometimes, they pour their hearts out, laugh, apologise or look down, then, for a moment, forget about all the troubles in the world, pull you by the sleeve and step into a new adventure.

If you happen to be in the ‘eternal spring city’ of Kunming, the capital of flower-, tea- and tobacco-growing Yunnan province, that adventure would certainly mean visiting *Shilin*, 270 million-years-old limestone forest that rises in hundreds of peaks and shapes from a green plateau and tells a tragic love story of a Sani girl Ashima; or eating ‘crossing the bridge noodles’ in a busy restaurant called Happiness where the treat includes an acrobatic performance, vigorous or rhythmic dancing of several Chinese nationalities in colourful Mexican or Hungarian-resembling costumes and an auction of antiques, for rich tourists no doubt; the adventure would also mean taking a stroll through the minority villages where 26 nationalities are represented in almost authentic, but commercial touristy environment with replicas of famous pagodas, temples, mud or straw houses.

There, young people dressed in colourful costumes perform rituals or sing and dance to the beat of drums, surrounded by animal totems or fertility stone sculptures symbolising a host of animistic beliefs. You may be invited to your student’s home for a meal and meet three generations sharing a modest or luxurious house, depending on where they stand on the ladder of fast-developing Chinese entrepreneurial society. They would treat you like a semi-god or goddess and prepare an unforgettable feast for all your senses. At midnight you would take leave, content but humbled.

But if you happen to be in Qingdao in the northeast Province of Shandong, a city where Chinese politicians dream of retiring, such is its beauty, your young guides would surely take you to the pearl market and help you choose delicate silver or white pearls that come alive only when touching the warmth of your neck. Or perhaps you might end up in a superb seafood restaurant enjoying steamed gold fish, snails in ginger sauce or sweet crabs with fried seaweed in delicious spices, sipping the best *Tsingdao* beer or wine. But if you try to encourage your hosts to stay sober, they will reply by reciting Li Po’s verse:

This time of ours
Is like a great, confused dream.
Why should one spend one’s life in toil?
Thinking this, I have been drunk all day¹²

Your journey does not end here. Nor does this story. Once you’ve lived through weary long hours of toiling over your



lessons, tests and marking percentages, panting up hundreds of stairs to your bleak classroom or flat, occasional mental and body upsets, coughs and colds or Melbourne-like changes of seasons, you become addicted to it all—to the scent of peach blossoms, symbolising immortality of Chinese Paradise, the taste of hot beancurd drowning in chilli from Sechuan in your mouth, the incomprehensible mutter of Mandarin tonal words while struggling to master a few phrases, the slender figures of girls with pink cheeks and shiny black hair holding hands, and the sight of disfigured beggars in the streets of big cities, drawing Chinese characters on the pavement, making a living.

When you leave this immense permanent building site of a country, the mystery stays with you. You come home happy and relieved, only to discover that you must go back again. Despite all those who tell you about their neglect of the environment and individuals, their human rights record, godless creatures, heavy hand of justice, capital punishment and how cheap life is, about silenced lips and exiled intellectuals, and that you’ll get sick again, you feel the urge to return—and who are they to judge? You know that change happens, but ‘ripeness is all’. Some of those 800 million farmers survive on a dollar a day. Yet, they smile at you.

Your passion takes you back to hear the true stories of those good women of China from Xinran Hue’s heart-wrenching prose¹³ and to ask why Chinese characters representing female + housework = woman and female + son = good, to check if your students are still reading *China Daily* in English, to glimpse at another pair of three-inch ‘lotus feet’¹⁴ of weathered old ladies, to climb the Jade Dragon Snow Mountain because dragon is your sign of joy and good health, to bite into a delicious Lijiang *baba*¹⁵ while watching *Naxi* women in a rhythmic line dance, to navigate through the crowd of E-bikes and Cuban-like bicytaxis, engulfed in petrol fumes and dust from fast-rising buildings and, above all, to let your heart rupture the boundaries. Once you’ve accomplished the task and grasped your purpose, you realise that the ‘One’ from

Chou Ping's poem is the One of the Tao, which tells us that 'To perceive the subtle is to have true vision/To be soft is to be truly strong' and that one should 'Use the outer light, but return to the inner' for 'In this way, you will restore your integral virtue / and be preserved from all harm'¹⁶. That is the Tao that embraces the whole universe.

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Notes and references

- 1 Chou Ping is a Chinese poet and translator who belongs to the 'Post-Misty Poets' movement, lives in America and writes in English. The citation is taken from *Out of the howling storm: The new Chinese poetry* (1993), ed. T. Barnstone, Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, p. 36.
- 2 *Naxi* (pronounced as *Nashi*) is a 300,000-strong ethnic minority group from Yunnan Province which lives mainly in ancient dreamlike places such as Lijiang and Baisha on the southwest side of the Tibetan Plateau—better known as The Roof of the World, practises their own language of Sino-Tibetan origin with the only living hieroglyphic script (known as pictographs—1400 in total!) in the world, and Dongba religion based on Tibetan Buddhism (and pre-Buddhist Bon religion) and Taoism with countless spirits, gods, shamans, sacred animals and deified ancestors whose representations are displayed in magnificent Baisha frescoes.
- 3 The certificate is delivered as part of the Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE international English language programs. NMIT has had a remarkable presence in China as a successful education partner to numerous universities for more than a decade.
- 4 Some anthropologists point out that there are over 200 ethnic minorities in China today, well integrated in the contemporary society, but many of them are not recognised as separate nationalities even though they may have distinctive customs, languages, rituals, tradition and cultures.
- 5 *Wushu* ('martial' art or 'skill') is a Chinese word for all the styles of Chinese martial arts, referring to both bare hands and weapons (eg pushing hands, sword, fan) and is synonymous with *kung fu* or *gongfu* ('achievement through great effort' or 'virtue'). There are numerous *wushu* styles and schools, and their classifications, in China. Some of the basic divisions, often overlapping, include External (eg *Shaolin wushu*), Internal (eg *Yang* or *Chen* style *Taijiquan*), Northern (eg *Long fist*), Southern (eg *Southern fist*; *Hung Gar*), Buddhist (eg *Shaolinquan*; *White crane*), Daoist (eg *Wudangquan*) and Muslim (eg *Chaquan*).
- 6 *Tai chi* or *taiji* ('grand ultimate') is a form of Chinese internal martial arts, representing a health and relaxation exercise system or a gentle skill of flowing movements, also known as 'meditation in motion' or 'cotton fist'.
- 7 See note 5 above.
- 8 *Guanxi* is an essential concept in Chinese society related to a common but complex set of relationships amongst people who create networks that bind them together by mutual obligations, such as giving and receiving favours, and by recognising the reciprocal nature of their social interaction.
- 9 *Mah-jong* (*mahjongg*) is a four-player game with tiles resembling dominos with various designs. It is similar to the card game gin rummy.
- 10 A very popular four-stringed instrument that resembles a guitar or lute, it has a pear-shaped body and is first mentioned in the texts from the 2nd century BC.
- 11 Qin Shi Huangdi, 3rd century BC, is known as the king who conquered the warring states, unified China and became its first emperor, expanding its territories, developing scholarship, building the Great Wall, but burning the books from the previous era.
- 12 The verse is taken from *Classical Chinese literature: An anthology of translations*, vol. 1 (2000), eds J. Minford & J.S.M. Lau, trans. A. Lowell & F. Ayscough, New York: Columbia University Press, & Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, p.753.
Li Po (Li Bai) is known as one of the Great Immortals from 8th century BC. An imperial poet and a wanderer, he was influenced by both Taoist and Confucian thought and is famous for his romantic, heroic and humorous, ballad-style lyrics. Legend has it he was eight feet tall, a hedonist and a free wine-loving spirit who drowned while trying to touch the reflection of the moon in the water.
- 13 Xinran Hue (2002), *The good women of China: Hidden voices*, trans. E. Tyldesley, London: Chatto & Windus. The book is based on the testimonials of many Chinese women who opened their aching hearts to Xinran and her evening radio-broadcast, 'Words on the Night Breeze' in the late 1980s.
- 14 Foot binding ('golden lilies') was a cruel, thousand-year-old, widespread custom (eradicated in the early 20th century) in China that required women to have their toes smashed and bound (except the big toe) at an early age so their feet, shaped as a lotus flower, would look 'beautiful' or rather, sexually desirable, because the cultural standard of beauty created by men for their own pleasure had to be observed despite the agony women endured throughout their lives.
- 15 Lijiang *baba* is a round flaky pastry, rich and tasty, filled with ham and egg or maple syrup or honey, a specialty of the local women in the Old Town of Dayan Lijiang in Yunnan Province.
- 16 *The Complete Works of Lao Tzu, Tao Teh Ching and Hua Hu Ching* (1998), trans. Hua-Ching Ni, Santa Monica: Seventy Star Communications, verse 52, p.71.

Beside the Whiteboard

Fran O'Neill has brought her passion for social justice and the rights of all to further education and lifelong learning to her work with VALBEC. She has had an extensive career in adult education, and has written papers and presented at numerous events and conferences in the ALBE field. A career highlight was a trip to China in 2002 to co-present at the Learn conference. Fran recently resigned from the VALBEC executive. Lynne Matheson speaks to Fran as she reflects on a rich professional life.

What is your current work?

Currently I am head of the Foundation Studies Department at Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE (NMIT). I started here in 1991 as a teacher in the ALBE program at the Collingwood campus. In the late 1990s I was relocated to Epping where I set up a new ALBE program, and have done a range of jobs since then in our further education faculty, including the coordination of professional development and working on a number of projects. I started in this position, head of department, late in 2002. Foundation Studies runs quite a large suite of ESL (including AMEP) and ALBE programs over four campuses and employs about 90 ongoing, contract and sessional teachers.

Can you tell us a bit of your professional background?

I originally trained as a primary teacher and spent my early teaching years in remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory and North Queensland. After teaching in these communities for about seven years, I ended up at James Cook University in Townsville as a tutor on what was the Aboriginal and Islander Teacher Education Program (AITEP). Those years were very rewarding for me. I learned so much about Indigenous peoples, their histories and lifestyles, and the many ways people can be disadvantaged, and yet in so many ways empowered through the strength of common and evolving culture.

How did you get involved with ESL/basic education?

Throughout these years of teaching in northern Australia I was always interested in language and culture and the formation of identity. I studied a lot over the years, and while I always asked questions about the validity of formal education for people who live and think outside the mainstream, I would always convince myself in the end that education is the key. I was heavily influenced by Friirian notions of education and liberation. I especially came to believe that language and literacy were crucial tools to provide access points into communities (in the broadest sense of the word).

I came back to Melbourne early in 1990 with a young baby, looking for both lifestyle and career changes. I knew it had to be in education; I was still passionate about

language and literacy, but I wasn't sure I wanted to teach in primary schools after working with adults at the university. I looked around and found this new degree at La Trobe in adult literacy. My memory tells me it was the first formal qualification offered in adult literacy in Victoria. In many ways it was perfect for me—the course gave me the mix of theory and practice I needed, built on knowledge and thinking I already had from my previous experiences, and introduced me to some wonderful people who helped shape my career. I have met so many wonderful people over the last 16 years, and won't attempt to name them all, but I do need to name three people I met at La Trobe that year—Bev Campbell, Aileen Treloar and Peter Waterhouse. Their knowledge, wisdom and passion got me hooked into the field, and I thank them for that.

What other things have you been involved in?

While I was still enrolled in the course at La Trobe, I was lucky enough to get the job at NMIT as an adult literacy teacher at the Collingwood campus. This was just post-International Literacy Year, and preliminary work was being done on developing a credential for adult literacy. We all know it as the CGEA now, but in the early 1990s there was huge critical debate going on about the ethics of attempting to describe the wholeness of language, literacy and numeracy in competency terms. I remember going to forums in the early 1990s to assess the progress of this credential, but I must admit I felt out of my depth in those early days. I was surrounded by remarkable people who had been in the field already for a long time, people like Daryl Evans, Rob McCormack, Delia Bradshaw, Rosa McKenna and Liz Suda to name a few. I also found that I had a real gap in my local knowledge and history, having been out of Melbourne and Victoria for over 12 years and significantly, not spending the heady 1980s here! But soon I got invited onto the VALBEC general committee, and started to get to know people in the field a little better, and to understand the Victorian education system and its structures.

Compared to now, there was money around in those days. The initial CGEA was well resourced for the development of support materials, and I worked on a number of projects

to support the roll out of the CGEA. The timing of this coincided with the federal commitment to improving adult English language literacy and numeracy skills in Australia by providing funding through SIP and OLMA programs, so at NMIT we were able to develop our ALBE and ESL programs, turning part-time provision into full-time courses. I was on the reaccreditation committees for the CGEA in 1997 and 2001, so in spite of its controversial beginning I feel a certain connection to the CGEA, having been involved in some capacity with it from its inception. I've written a few articles over the years and have presented numerous workshops on putting critical literacy theory into action in the ALBE classroom.

Tell us about your work with the *Fine Print* editorial committee

At some point in the mid-1990s, after being on the VALBEC general committee for a few years, I was invited onto the *Fine Print* editorial committee. I think it was about 1994. In those days VALBEC had premises—we were in Ross House in Flinders Lane in the city and this is where the FP committee met, invariably ending up at Young and Jackson's for a beer before heading home. I was on this committee for about six years, eventually convening it. Over those years I lived through many changes with and much debate about FP. The image changed considerably and fairly consistently; the editor and publisher changed often too.

The thing I love about *Fine Print* is how it constantly reinvents itself. New sections get added, others deleted. The beauty of the *Fine Print* committee then, as it is now, is that it is staffed by active practitioners. So when the committee asks itself, "what do our readers want to read about?" committee members fairly well know the answer. Too much theory, not enough theory; not enough practice, too much policy; not enough policy, too many academics; not enough real people, real voices. I bet the current FP committee still has the same debates. That's good, that's crucial, because a journal that does not ask these critical questions will not attract and maintain a readership base, and it will not provide what the language, literacy and numeracy and associated fields need to keep them informed, challenged and stimulated.

How have you seen the relationship between theory and practice evolve over time?

When we were producing *Fine Print* in the 1990s I think we went a bit radical! The committee at the time was filled with quite radical people really, with strong opinions and who were not shy about expressing them! Seriously though, there was strong opinion towards more and more theory and that's where the journal headed. Systemic Functional Linguistics was popular at the time, and the

interpretation of this into a genre or critical literacy approach was a big debate.

In its early days FP had been a very practical journal. I think this change to exploring more theory was not unlike any other change, especially in the mid-1990s and the political climate we were living in. The frustration with the dichotomy of state and federal politics probably manifested itself in a place where practitioners could use their voice. I'm not just talking about the committee here, I'm thinking of all the active practitioners who wrote for FP over that time. Anyway, I think the pendulum has had its swing and these days I think FP is better balanced, particularly with the addition of Practical Matters. Still, I believe that theory informs practice, and would hope that FP maintains a commitment to exploring new theories and debating methodologies for the teaching and learning of language, literacy and numeracy.

Tell us more about your involvement in VALBEC. Why did you get involved? Why did you think it worthwhile?

My usual response to this is because I have a death wish! I had no way of knowing when I joined the VALBEC general committee in 1991 that it would be a 15-year commitment! Well, I actually think our involvement with our professional organisation is a lifetime involvement, but I have chosen to stay active for the last 15 years. I've had different levels of involvement over the time, sometimes being on two committees at the same time, sometimes just one. I got involved originally because I was curious and I stayed involved because I came to realise the power of the collective, particularly when you are working with disadvantaged and marginalised groups. A lone voice doesn't carry much sway, and anyway it's lonely being isolated in a classroom when story after story from students confirms for you that the system just doesn't work for everyone. You just can't bring about effective change and you can't change government agendas on your own. It's hard enough as a group, but we have more chance when we pool our resources and work together to support each other.

What are VALBEC's strengths?

The people who are VALBEC. VALBEC is not a concept. It is real and vibrant, and the energy, passion and commitment that the active members bring to it are its strength. I must admit, I was very worried when VALBEC gave up its physical location in Ross House. It was a financial decision, and one that had to be made at the time, but I was concerned that we would lose our identity. Well, I'm happy to be proved wrong. I think VALBEC's identity is probably stronger than ever; eVALBEC as a communication tool was a brilliant idea I think, and the currency of our web page means that information is there

at our fingertips. The best thing we ever did is employ Don MacDowall, who is the mastermind behind both of these.

I also think the annual VALBEC Conference is a real strength. For me it is always a highlight, bringing practitioners together from across the state. I must say it is a lot of work, getting a state-wide conference up every year. At times we have thought about going biannual, but I think the field votes with its feet, making the most of the opportunity for professional development and networking.

What have been the major challenges for VALBEC?

Funding, funding, funding. VALBEC receives an annual grant from ACFE to provide a range of services including professional development. The ACFE grant subsidises *Fine Print* and some other activities, otherwise VALBEC relies on memberships for income. All committees at VALBEC—the General, Fine Print and Conference Committees—rely on the goodwill of its members to work voluntarily. I would have met and worked with hundreds of people through my work with VALBEC over the past 15 years and I've never heard anyone complain about the workload or the fact there is no monetary gain to be had. But what I have heard consistently is that people burn out from trying to do it all. Our full/part-time paid work has become more demanding and more diverse, as has the society in which we are all trying to raise children. For everyone I know and have known on all VALBEC committees, it is a constant juggle to live the commitment we feel towards

our professional organisation and our colleagues and friends, the work we *want* to do, without neglecting the work we must do in our workplaces and at home.

What advice ideas, directions would you give to new teachers in adult literacy fields?

Join your professional organisation and support it—you'll get back more than you put in!

- Never divorce education and politics.
- Never forget that education, particularly to marginalised and disadvantaged groups, is political activity.
- Know that real literacy is more than reading and writing.
- Tap into the life skills and wisdom of your students.
- Be honest with your students; show your real self.
- Keep exploring the theory behind your teaching, stay current. Frank Smith said something like, "Don't ask me: 'What can I teach on Monday morning?' Ask me: 'What do I need to know about reading and writing so I can make the best decision about what to teach on Monday morning?'"
- Never underestimate your ability to bring about change.

Fran, you have made a tremendous contribution to the ALBE field and to VALBEC. You are highly regarded and greatly appreciated by all who have come to know and work with you. It has been a privilege to work alongside you on the VALBEC committee and as co-presidents. I would like to personally thank you for your wisdom, humour and strength throughout this time. Good luck for whatever comes next!