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# Editorial

Welcome to the autumn edition of *Fine Print*, where we will travel the globe through multiple literacies. The landscape includes the highlands of Scotland, Chiang Mai, Canada, Lightning Ridge and closer to home, Braybrook, Collingwood and Fitzroy. It incorporates various forms of literacy including oral, visual, new computer technologies and print. Take your time and enjoy the journey.

In an article that incorporates international health and literacy issues, Julie Green discusses a research project in an Australian context. The research, conducted with a group of parents living in public housing in inner Melbourne, investigates the role of literacy in the development of parents' health-related knowledge and in the delivery of services and programs to promote wellbeing. Using semi-structured, individual interviews the research addresses the intricacies at the intersection of health and literacy.

Margaret Somerville's article 'Literacy as Translation' continues the theme of expanding literacy through a framework of multiliteracies. In this article, Margaret Somerville argues that all literacy is an act of translation, a 'moving across'. Through the concept of multiliteracies, she suggests that we '... reconceptualise how we understand literacy itself and what this means for literacy pedagogies'. The notion involves moving between different modes of literacy, to facilitate the act of moving between—the act of translation.

In October 2005, Feltex Carpets retrenched 165 process workers from its spinning department. Retrenched textile workers used their solidarity and strong sense of community to form the basis of a storytelling project, Finding the Threads. Oral historian and writer Tricia Bowen worked with the union project over 12 months to capture the sense of family that the workers had created during their years together. Shared experiences of migrating to Australia in the 70s and 80s, the challenges of having no English language, and the pride of having had the same job since starting at 14, is captured in these stories. An intimacy had grown between the workers at Feltex—the building of relationships through respect, support and shared laughter. The retrenched textile workers were encouraged to photograph their work and lives at home. These images made

up an exhibition titled A Strong Weave. The photo exhibition accompanied the book launch exactly 12 months after the retrenchment. This is a compelling account of a community, a chronicling of lives that helps make meaning for the workers of Feltex Carpets.

In Practical Matters, Bronwen Hickman suggests that 'the history of English spelling is about understanding the mistakes of the past'. With this philosophy Hickman provides a positive approach to spelling. 'Have a Spell' is an energetic and pacy practical guide to teaching spelling. It offers ideas and tips on how to create interesting and intriguing spelling lessons.

Debbie Soccio introduces a new section to *Fine Print* called Technology Matters. In this edition, a basic lexicon of technological terms is provided. What is a blog, a blue tooth and a podcast? Find out how to join a Literacy Live Forum or create a digital story.

Open Forum gives us a chance to feature articles on the new CGEA. Karen Manwaring makes a request for teachers, students, administrators and researchers involved in the new CGEA to provide feedback and reflection. The question of qualifications for teaching the CGEA is discussed by Di Parslow, and Lynne Matheson takes us for a walk around the new CGEA.

In Foreign Correspondence, Debbie Soccio travels to Canada and reports on the Canadian education system. This detailed overview covers the traditional formal educational institutions in Canada and the extensive online delivery available for literacy and basic skills.

And finally, in Beside the Whiteboard Sam Jackson details the results of his decision to retire to Thailand. Conducting English conversation classes at a high school near Chiang Mai included more than just talk. Participating in the male staff 400-metre dash is part of a humorous account that highlights cultural protocols.

We hope you enjoy this edition of *Fine Print* with its global and local emphasis on language, literacies and learning.

Yvonne Russell

**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.**

# Health literacy: socially situating community-based research

by Julie Green

**Nothing is clear-cut where education and health intersect, and recent research into the development of parents' health-related knowledge took on the challenge of drawing on concepts and methods from literacy as much as from health research.**

## Introduction

This paper provides an overview of the growing interest in the field of health literacy. It outlines the processes associated with a research project that is addressing the role of literacy in the production of adults' health-related knowledge. The paper describes the integration of concepts and constructs from literacy into health research, and some of the theoretical ideas that have shaped the research approach.

Literacy and health deeply influence social participation, engagement in social resources and quality of life. The two forces are constantly converging in the course of everyday lives. Consider these two excerpts from parent interviews that illustrate the intersection of literacy and health precipitated by the advent of parenthood:

Interviewer: Which hospital are you having your baby at?

Trang (parent): I don't know the name of it. I have it on a piece of paper but I don't read. I could ask my son or my daughter.

Zara (parent) ... and I found that going to the health nurse, and just the leaflets she'd give out was enough, like, when I was there (antenatal classes) lots of the women were saying that they bought this book or that text on you know, these big childcare books and stuff which I've never done ... But I find books not something I can relate to. I'll pick up leaflets and read through them—maybe because it's set out smaller like, you know ... kind of that less information and not gettin' overloaded with a heap of things.

These comments from Trang and Zara (pseudonyms) suggest that literacy plays different roles in decision-making and problem-solving in a health context. However, literacy is seldom the focus of attention of health policy and programs. Precisely what role literacy does play in the development of health-related knowledge for parents, and in the design and delivery of services to promote health and wellbeing, is the subject of the research outlined in this paper. Prior to describing some of the critical influences on the design of the study situated at the intersection of education and health,

from which the above excerpts are drawn, an orientation to the activity at the convergence of the two fields is necessary.

## The convergence of literacy and health

Measures of both health and literacy are frequently cited to reflect accomplishments in the social, civic and political arenas.<sup>1</sup> Health, conceptualised as a complete state of wellbeing and a resource for living,<sup>2</sup> functions as a kind of core signature theme of modern societies in general and is perceived to be a measure of the degree to which a society delivers a good life to its citizens.<sup>3</sup> Education, and literacy by association, is a key determinant of access to health services and illness-prevention opportunities.<sup>4</sup>

The study of the connections between literacy and health, evident since the 1980s, has been the result of collaboration between adult literacy, health professionals and adult learners. Their focus has been on the improvement of the health of adults with low literacy, the production of more appropriate health-related materials and raising awareness of literacy within the health sector.<sup>5</sup> Health has long been part of the curriculum for teaching adult literacy and a focus for engaging adult learners in the management of their wellbeing in the wider society.<sup>6</sup>

The connections between literacy and health are becoming better understood as research progressively uncovers the relation between the two. We know that people with low functional literacy are less likely to engage in illness prevention practices.<sup>7</sup> They are less likely to detect the onset of disease at an early stage.<sup>8,9</sup> They experience less success in accessing information about community-based resources<sup>10</sup> and in managing longer-term, chronic illness.<sup>11,12</sup> Because of the association between socioeconomic disadvantage, relatively unskilled jobs and low literacy, people with lower levels of education are more likely to be at a higher risk of injury and premature death.<sup>13</sup>

The detectable, international shift now is that literacy, increasingly understood within its own field as a skill that develops throughout life and necessary for lifelong learning,<sup>14</sup> is considered central to effective engagement in good health and wellbeing.<sup>15,16</sup>

Both the literacy and health fields are in the process of responding to systemic social change such as family structure, multicultural and therefore multilingual populations and cultural constructions. The challenges of promoting good health and preventing ill health are inevitably being shaped by these factors. The adult literacy sector, both internationally and more recently in Australia, is also channelling more attention to how literacy influences the field of health within the context of social change, identifying possible priorities for research across this common ground.<sup>17</sup>

## Health literacy

This intersection of health and literacy has emerged more recently through the sub-field of health literacy. Health literacy is centrally concerned with locating, understanding and using information for making health-related decisions and generating information for the promotion of health.<sup>18,19</sup>

The majority of the rapidly expanding literature in this sub-field reflects a focus on improving the health literacy of patients in clinical health settings such as hospitals and general practice, and on the importance of producing, for adults with lower literacy, materials written in plain language on the taking of medication as prescribed and managing chronic conditions such as diabetes or heart disease. In other words, the interest has been in responding to health literacy once disease is established.

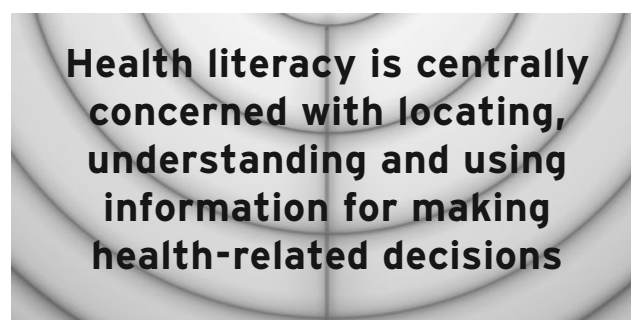
The role accorded to literacy in the health field is most commonly understood within a functional literacy paradigm, whereby most health-related information is produced in technical literacy prose and expressed in standard English.<sup>1</sup> This form of literacy assumes good literacy capabilities of populations and takes little account of the range of literacy skills and multiple literacy practices. These are concepts that are little known in health policy, research and practice domains.

There are welcome signs that health literacy is beginning to extend beyond an understanding of functional health literacy to take account of the convergence of education, health, social and cultural influences.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, they converge with the underlying ethos of public health principles which involve addressing social, environmental and cultural factors that support healthy living and supportive environments and seek to influence the factors which put people's good health at risk.

Several major areas of potential intervention to influence literacy in the context of health have been identified in a landmark report focusing on health literacy.<sup>20</sup> Intervention is seen to be most needed by taking account of social and cultural factors at home, at work and in the community, the health system and the education system. These factors are detectable in the comment from Trang, quoted earlier, whose inability to read the name of the hospital where she is due to give birth is described later in the interview by her necessary departure from

school in Vietnam, aged seven, to help look after her younger siblings. Being attuned to these factors is essential.

Opportunities for literacy and health researchers and practitioners to interact, share evidence and to collaborate are being greatly assisted by the world wide web. Health and literacy internet discussion groups that deliver regular, moderated messages to subscribers (such as the one coordinated by the US National Institute for Literacy at <http://www.nifl.gov/mailman/listinfo/healthliteracy>) are generating vigorous discussion and information sharing. Topics include the use of study circles, the role of pictures in health communication, health and literacy teaching activities, just to mention a few.



Adult literacy organisations (such as The Centre for Literacy, Quebec) and public health academic schools (for example, Harvard School of Public Health) are posting teaching resources, literature reviews, annotated bibliographies and forthcoming events on their websites. Conferences focusing on health literacy are now commonly hosted by hospitals, adult literacy peak bodies and pharmaceutical companies. While the majority of this activity is occurring in North America, the electronic nature of these types of communication enables participation globally by professionals from both fields.

The health-related doctoral research, described below, involves rethinking the literacy-health connection from a cross-sectoral perspective. It is primarily concerned with investigating the role of literacy in the development of parents' health-related knowledge and in the delivery of services and programs to promote wellbeing in an Australian context. In the following section, I outline some of the processes and objectives guiding this community-based research.

## New notions for health research

The outcome of exploring the range of literacy concepts and theory, and the multiplicity of definitions as part of the research, is that I am working with the concept of literacy as 'a complex set of abilities needed to understand and use the dominant symbol systems of a culture—alphabets, numbers, visual icons—for personal and community development. The nature of these abilities, and the demand for them, vary from one context to another'.<sup>20</sup> This offers wider parameters than a characterisation of literacy as simply cognitive and independent

of context. It is better able to account for a range of skills activated in a variety of situations, such as those described by both parents at the introduction of this paper. Importantly, it also accounts for new settings and technologies<sup>21, 22</sup> and therefore resonates with the processes involved in the pursuit of health.

The study has been shaped by thinking that literacy is acculturated into the natural flow of life of families and communities<sup>23</sup> and by the notions of literacy and language as social practices—the real world presence of literacy—as described in the writing by theorists of New Literacy studies.<sup>24, 25, 26, 27, 28</sup> As a health professional and a relative newcomer to literacy theory, the notion that literacy is not a single thing that has universal meaning in all contexts and societies has been a revelation for me. I take some learning from this ‘naturalised’ approach of viewing various literacy practices as part of everyday life. Rather than seeing literacy as ‘the technical’, which is restrictive, adopting an approach to investigate literacy as socially situated opens up new ways of recognising the presence and significance of multiple literacies, and the strengths that people already have when it comes to developing their knowledge about health and wellbeing.

### **The research context**

The research is being conducted with a cohort of parents who are responsible for the care and wellbeing of their children, and a cohort of workers drawn from health, education, housing and community sectors. The geographic area of the study is within the neighbouring suburbs of Fitzroy and Collingwood in inner Melbourne, with a particular emphasis on parents living in public housing. Low-income residents in these suburbs experience poorer health outcomes in comparison to the rest of the state of Victoria<sup>29</sup>, so in addition to insights that the study can provide at an empirical level, it can provide new knowledge for tackling some of the determinants of inequality within the local setting. Whilst the study is occurring in an area of social disadvantage, the intention is neither to problematise the disadvantage nor to focus or inflame any stigma that may be associated with low income, low literacy or poorer health.

The two suburbs have been selected for several reasons that make the area rich in potential to answer the research questions. Both Fitzroy and Collingwood are a key focus of health and wellbeing by the local community health service provider that, true to a tradition extending back into the nineteenth century, champions health-promoting initiatives, plays a critical role in improving the health of its local marginalised communities and is vitally interested in the research outcomes. Indeed, it has provided an enormous amount of practical assistance in setting up and conducting the research. The public housing estates of both suburbs are sites of the Neighbourhood Renewal program which comes under two of the Victorian government’s policies. Firstly, Growing Victoria Together (March 2005)

aims to achieve high quality access to health and community services and to build confident and safe communities and reduce disadvantage. Secondly, A Fairer Victoria: Progress and Next Steps (June 2006) is addressing disadvantage through a focus on early intervention and prevention. Since both suburbs are in the same local government area, parents are more likely to be exposed to services and programs related to child and family wellbeing that the local council provides.



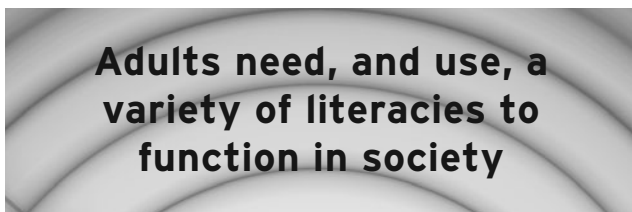
Importantly, the study area is home to strong community support initiatives from health, adult education, welfare and community organisations that are predisposed to working in coordinated and innovative ways across disciplines, agencies and sectors, and in ways that are responsive to the social and cultural fabric of the Collingwood and Fitzroy communities. Finally, the cultural and linguistic diversity of the neighbourhoods enables the inclusion of parent participants from a range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, with varying lengths of stay in Australia and with a range of experiences of the health and education system.

### **Selecting an appropriate research approach**

The research approach and the choice of methods for this study have significant theoretical influences, some of which I will outline here. The principal data collection method I am using is semi-structured, individual interviews. Research interviews have been used successfully to characterise the diversity and complexity surrounding literacy activities in adult education<sup>30,31</sup> They are also frequently used in the health field to understand how people experience an event, why people behave the way they do or why practices or changes have occurred<sup>32,33</sup> Grounded in people’s experiences and views, individual interviews are a powerful methodology and offer a way of addressing the intricacies at the intersection of the two fields, precisely where the parameters of knowledge are less well known.

My approach to conducting interviews has been influenced by some of the classical feminist research literature, particularly the writing of Ann Oakley.<sup>34</sup> Oakley redefined the paradigm of interviews when she identified a contradiction between a traditional, detached view to interviewing people as passive objects as a way of obtaining data and a convention of inequality between interviewer and interviewee. Her scholarship (and others,

subsequently) opened up a paradigm that provided an alternative. It was predicated on her belief that the best way for finding out about people, and developing new knowledge to understand a problem, is through a non-hierarchical approach whereby the interviewer 'is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship'.<sup>35</sup> In other words, the interviewer establishes a relationship that acknowledges the presence of the researcher. It allows for the development of a closer relation, reciprocity and the minimisation of status differences wherever possible. Rather than adopt a neutral position, interviews can be more of a co-production and can take context and culture into account. Participants have more power to discuss issues that they feel are relevant beyond what the interviewer introduces, bringing a distinct knowledge and a new scientific truth.<sup>36,37</sup> These foundations are also a good match with my own practice and experience as nurse, midwife and now researcher in the milieu of home- and community-based health care.



The flexibility of using interviews enables inclusion of parents with diverse biographies; for example, cultural background, sole and partnered parental status and the length of time living in Australia—factors that may influence the experience of learning about the care and wellbeing of children. Interviews provide an important benefit of integrating interpreters into some of the parent interviews, which enables the inclusion of participants beyond those competent in spoken English. Questions to practitioners from education, health, housing and library sectors on how literacy, language, education and culture are taken into account in their work can also be modified during an interview, according to participants' work and agencies' roles. As it has transpired, the use of a text-based research method would have prevented the participation of several parents with no prose literacy in either their primary language or English—some of the very parents whose experiences I set out to include and understand.

The majority of parents who have taken part in the study have been recruited via my attendance at their community groups, such as parent groups and playgroups. In addition to parents having the opportunity to hear about the study, ask questions and 'size me up' at their group meetings, this has provided a valuable platform on which to begin interviews—from having some familiarity with what the group is about and where it is located and knowing their children's names.

Consistent with the processes involved in ethical research, part of the objective of my study is obtaining the informed,

voluntary consent of participants. The standard mechanism of providing this information is through the written word in a way that is clearly understood by potential participants; that is, in plain language.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, the preparation of a plain language statement is a standard requirement of human research ethics committees. Adult literacy professionals will be well aware, however, of the wide variation in the Australian population's ability to use written information, even when the text is translated into languages other than English. Being aware that the level of written information about the study to satisfy some participants' institutional requirements and knowledge needs would most likely be beyond the functional literacy capability of others, my practice at the beginning of every interview, has been to verbally explain the study information. This ensures the information is understood, and provides an opportunity for participants to clarify information and make a truly informed decision about whether or not to proceed. Similar consideration will be given to literacy and language competency and appropriate modes for dissemination of results to interested participants, once the study is completed.

## Conclusion

Adults need, and use, a variety of literacies to function in society and in a health-related environment, as the opening comments from Trang and Zara attest.

The indications are that literacy-and-health is receiving heightened attention, particularly the sub-field of health literacy. New knowledge is needed to meet the challenges of satisfying health-related knowledge needs, particularly for people experiencing the poorest health.

Notions of contextualised and multiple literacies continue to inform and invigorate this research. They represent a lens with which to understand adult literacy concepts and constructs in the context of health and wellbeing. In combination with a paradigm grounded in bringing participants' experiences and views to the fore, the study represents a critical step forward to building a larger and stronger foundation of evidence to inform the health literacy field and to support practice and policy decisions in new and informed ways.

**Julie Green has a nursing, midwifery and public health background and a long-standing interest in research initiatives that inform the promotion of wellbeing and account for social and cultural contexts. Julie's PhD research at the University of Melbourne is supported by a National Health and Medical Research Council postgraduate scholarship (public health).**

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Continued on page 18 ...

# Literacy as translation

by Margaret Somerville

**All literacy is an act of translation, and the concept of multiliteracies is especially so because it involves moving between different modes of literacy—which is again an act of translation.**

What knowledge and skills do Aboriginal artists, coal miners, and a Scottish migrant have in common? How can we think literacy differently? Through ethnographic research we can analyse high-level multiliteracies that characterise different individuals, cultures and sub-cultural groups who might otherwise be regarded as ‘illiterate’. The new theories of bodies and spatiality that underpin this research help us to understand literacy differently. In this paper I will argue that, within a framework of multiliteracies, all literacy can be seen as an act of translation. Emerging computer technologies reinforce this view and offer powerful alternatives for teaching and learning multiliteracies. Understanding literacy in this way helps literacy workers develop appropriate pedagogies to enable learners to have a greater range of choices and options for engaging with print literacies.

## Introduction

I want to begin by reflecting briefly on the simple act of acknowledging traditional owners, which is the beginning point of many oral presentations in Australia today. In thinking about this process of acknowledgement we draw attention to the embodied spatiality, to the performative dimensions of knowledge as relationship and communication, to the collective nature of knowledge rather than the private, individualised and disembodied space of writing. It is a gestural act about beginnings, a protocol based in land, the land we all live in. In sharing this act we are entering into a contact zone of cross-cultural translation.

What image comes to your mind when we acknowledge the traditional owners of this land? For me, we are performing a protocol based on traditional Indigenous place practices of entering the country of another language group. It is an innovative development in contemporary Australia that enables us to create a small space of dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous meanings and interests in country. It is underpinned by what I have called place literacies (Somerville 2007), and is in many senses an act of translation, a moving across. It is based on a metaphor, a bridge that enables us to cross over into that different space. I will argue in this paper that all literacy is such an act of translation.

One of the research projects I am working on at the moment is about water in the drylands of the Murray-Darling basin. In this project I am interested in how we can learn to think differently about water. I am currently working with two

Aboriginal artists using an emergent arts-based methodology. I asked these artists to respond to the research proposal in stories and artworks. Here I would like to look closely at the literacies of one of the Indigenous partner researchers: Daphne Wallace is a Gamaroi/Ullaroi woman who grew up in Lightning Ridge in the drylands of the Murray-Darling Basin. She has responded to the written research proposal in visual images and stories. Daphne’s paintings are contemporary abstract, employing a variety of artistic styles and symbols through which to translate her meanings into visual form. Her paintings draw on her knowledge of country, on stories that have been handed down over generations, on her life experiences and on visual styles and symbols, materials and art practices of the contemporary art world. Even within the visual domain, Daphne employs a range of literacies, but she has also composed a children’s book as part of the project.

## Signs and symbols

In the process of making the Yurri Yurri book, Daphne reveals some very interesting insights into literacy. The cover page shows three children heading off into country in a style of naïve realism influenced, as Albert Namatjirra was, by European visual practices. The frame, however, a series of diamond shapes produced by cross-hatching, is Gamaroi iconography from the signs and symbols that Gamaroi people from this area used in designs on carved trees and body paintings. Even more deeply symbolic and hidden in meaning to the casual observer, there are stars in the sky in the shape of an emu. This symbol of the emu in the sky has both traditional and contemporary significance for Daphne. Emu eggs are an important food for Gamaroi people. Emus nest at a certain time of the year, and the time for collecting eggs is very precise because they must be collected before the young chick begins to grow and blood is present in the egg. This is because there is a prohibition for Daphne’s people on eating the emu itself. The time to collect emu eggs is marked by the appearance of a formation of stars in the Milky Way in the shape of an emu. The cover is not however about collecting emu eggs but shows the two figures heading across the red earth in the direction of the emu in the sky.

When the emu appears in the night sky in Lightning Ridge, Daphne’s mother calls her in Armidale and she makes the thousand-kilometre trip to Lightning Ridge to join in the gathering of emu eggs, so the emu story is about being called home. The entire Yurri story is embedded in that particular



place, the place where Daphne was born and grew up—her home place, her country. This image and its story is a metaphor, it is the sign that calls Daphne back to country. The title of the book, also on the front cover, *Yurri yurri*, is a Gamaroi word that cannot be readily translated into English. *Yurri yurri* are small hairy people that inhabit the country, the spirit world and the imagination of Gamaroi people, especially children. The names of the authors are also on the front cover: Daphne Wallace and Alpena her daughter. Are the two figures, I wonder, Daphne and her daughter travelling back to country and in time, and through storytelling?

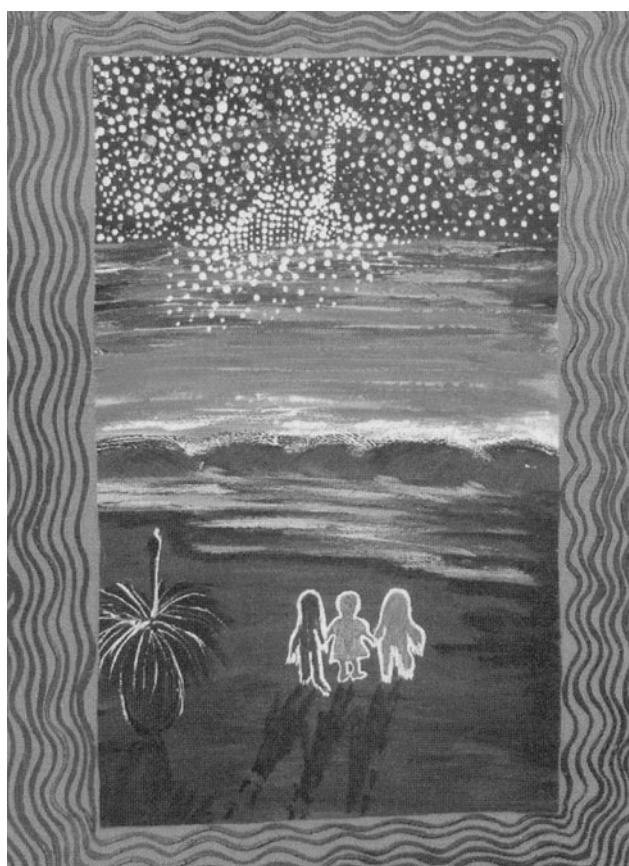
### A range of images

The *Yurri yurri* story as a book is a standard artefact of print literacy that evokes Daphne's childhood stories and memories of place. It begins with a traditional campfire and bark humpy, then a tin humpy, then a tin shack with a car, and finally ends with Daphne in her present house sitting at a computer with her daughter, telling her the story. In this sequence of pictures Daphne represents the translations of literacies embedded in this book as changes in the practices of storytelling and of home. She combines a range of visual images, oral language and print literacy. The story is told in Gamaroi language words, Aboriginal English, and standard English. The Aboriginal English is written to represent the sounds and rhythms of spoken storytelling, the standard English to translate the story into writing for a non Aboriginal audience and Gamaroi language for words that have no translation into English. All of this is assembled on a computer using digital photos of her paintings and typed words in an iphoto program. The computer is part of the project. Contemporary computer technologies facilitate this work of translation, moving between visual images, oral storytelling and written text. In contemporary theorising these different modalities are known as multiliteracies.

The concept of multiliteracies was introduced because of two main features of contemporary life—changing literacy practices as a result of computer technologies and increasing awareness of cultural diversity in a globalised world (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). They argue that 'Literacy pedagogy ... has been a carefully restricted project—restricted to monolingual, monocultural, and rule-governed forms of language' (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p.9). More significantly for my purposes here, Cope and Kalantzis draw attention to literacies of translation and translation of literacies:

the most important skill students need to learn is to negotiate regional, ethnic, or class based dialects; variations in register that occur according to social context; hybrid cross-cultural discourses; the code switching often to be found within a text among different languages, dialects or registers; different visual and iconic meanings; and variations in the gestural relationships among people, language and material objects. Indeed, (they say) this is the only hope for averting the

catastrophic conflicts about identities and spaces that now seem ever ready to flare up. (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p.14)



While I want to take up this concept of multiliteracies as a starting point, I am suggesting that we need to revise our very definition of literacy—not just in the sense that we add other forms such as computer literacies, eco-literacies, etc, but that we reconceptualise how we understand literacy itself and what this means for literacy pedagogies.

To continue to develop this idea I want to turn to a completely different place and set of literacy practices: a study of how underground coal miners learn safety. It is a very different place, but place is also highly significant in this learning. The underground coal mine is a place of total blackness when the small light of the battery operated lantern on the mine worker's helmet is out. It is a place where vision as the primary sensory mode is replaced by other senses. The mine workers talked about their bodies. The first and most obvious comment made by the mine workers was that an underground mine is an inherently dangerous place. They said: 'just to turn up for work, you were taking a risk, just by the nature of the work 'cause you're dealing with forces beyond your control'. Even under conditions of new technologies for mining, the mine remains dangerous for human bodies. They described the remote control miner: 'it's seventy tonne, it's fifteen metres long, and it has no feeling. It squashes you against a rib and it doesn't care one bit. You've gotta be conscious that something

can happen at any time'. The mine is portrayed as an uncaring and unpredictable place where just turning up for work puts the worker in danger. The motivation to learn safety is extremely high under conditions where the productivity of coal mines is still calculated by the ratio of tonnes of coal to the number of fatalities and accidents.

The mine workers described the process of becoming an experienced mine worker as one where knowledge about safety becomes so embedded in one's work practices that it becomes instinctive. This instinctive knowledge is called 'pit sense' and of all mining knowledges pit sense is the most complex, embodied and tacit. It is something that all miners develop because of the inherent life threatening nature of the mine as workplace. They talked about a heightened sensitivity to sounds, but also a heightened awareness of all their senses:

all the blokes have got pit sense. They know that the roof's bad, they know by hearing it, they know by smell, they know by the sense of just being there and being uncomfortable, the heaviness of the air, that you're in a place where you shouldn't be, lack of oxygen or gas. You'll feel the hairs move up on your legs, y'know, with black damp or something there.

Another worker touched the skin on the top of his ears as he described sensing subtle changes in air pressure:

when the fan stops, and everything's very still, and even if you're in an area where it's not a main airway where there's not a lot of air coming through, you still realise that, I guess that little bit of air on your ears you can feel and when that stops it just changes. I think that's a sort of an indication of a little bit of difference you can pick up.

In pit sense all the senses are employed in a complex interconnected way to provide information about whether the body-in-place is safe. It is entirely learned and I would describe it as a highly developed form of literacy. Safety training for mine workers has recently changed from learning with experienced mine workers and through their own experiences underground, to mandated training packages and systems of written signs. Many mine workers explained that there is a conflict between such 'paper knowledge' and pit sense. They said: 'on the paper it might look great. Down there, that's no good, if I stand there he's gunna bloody run into me or he's gunna drive into me. I'm not standing there'. Where personal safety is concerned, mine workers trust their body/place learning rather than paper knowledge. They criticise mandated safety training practices that fail to acknowledge the complex literacies involved in learning safety:

that seems to be the big downfall of all the training I've had, in safety. We can go through the accident procedures, the different procedures, whatever procedures they like to go

through, or read through 'em or talk about em, and we'll say, "We don't think this is right", but nothing's ever said about, what could happen if you don't follow (pit sense) and what will happen, it's not put over to the blokes like that.



The problem is that mine workers' body/place literacies are erased in paper knowledge. In the move towards training packages and mandated safety training, a limited print literacy regime has been imposed on these workers. This limited print literacy erases critical bodily and spatial literacies that underpin these miners' working knowledge. The first step in addressing issues of safety learning was to value these bodily and spatial literacies which are an integral part of the identity of these workers. When these body/place literacies are made explicit through a process of awareness, we can then ask what translations are required to move between this body/place knowledge and standard print literacy. The question for the workplace trainer/literacy educator then becomes: How can mine workers learn to move between the different modes of literacy required for their work in a way that each is relevant and meaningful?

Finally, another level of understanding the embedded nature of literacy practices came from my own experience. I have only recently begun to explore my self as a Scottish migrant and this is a tiny bit of my own story that helped me to think about literacy in a different way. My grandparents all migrated from Scotland, and as a typical second generation migrant I grew up with a fierce need for identity and belonging in the Australian landscape. My maternal grandmother had always talked about Scotland as home. She taught her daughters to recognise the Scottish landscape to such an extent that my aunty could recognise and describe Scotland more than Australia, even though she had never been there. I visited Scotland two years ago and experienced a profound and entirely unexpected sense of recognition of home and place. My Scottish relatives embraced me and said 'welcome home' and taught me about the struggle for culture, and for the Gaelic language. They expressed a profound sense of recognition that I rarely get in Australia, of my work with Indigenous stories. I walked on the moors in the Scottish highlands, listening to the haunting

sounds of pipers echoing from the valley below and cried for the loss of grandparents and stories.

## Epiphany in Scotland

This was all recognised at a deeply embodied level but it was at the Museum of Scotland that my conceptual insights about literacy came. I was travelling with a friend of English heritage with a long history of English literary traditions. She had always been surrounded by books and reading was second nature to her. My sparse Presbyterian home was bare of books and even when I was old enough to join the local library my preference was for the twin series about children from different cultures. I learned in the Museum of Scotland about how the Scots had resisted literacy because literate practices belonged to the coloniser and erased Scottish culture. They clung to their oral stories and songs, the sounds and rhythms of Gaelic language and Scottish dialects. Landscapes and objects were significant as markers of difference, making meaning of their indigenous relationship with their places.

These insights from Scotland made immediate sense of my life's work with landscape, language and oral text. It made sense of my desire to translate oral stories into written text without totally erasing the colour, sounds, and textures of place that are embedded in these stories. I now understand literacy practices as fundamental to how we are in the world and to how we make individual and cultural meanings. More recently I have begun to incorporate visual and aural images into my work, liberated like Daphne by digital technologies. These are not additions in the sense of illustrations, but are fundamental to the meanings that are being made. They enable me to express understandings that could not be communicated, or even made articulate, in other ways. I now use new computer technologies to create conversations between these different modes of representation, to facilitate the act of moving between, of translation. There are some things I can only express in these other modalities but even more importantly, it is from the moving between, the act of translation, that meanings are made and remade.

In conclusion, we can no longer assume that standard print literacy is the only, or even the dominant, mode through which humans make meaning of the worlds in which we live and work. The ways that we make meaning, the different modalities that we use, include oral, visual, and kinaesthetic forms of expression and communication. These forms are all aspects of multiliteracies through which we know and can be in the world. They are not alternatives, or options, or lesser forms of standard print literacy, but they are integral to who we are and how we make meaning in and of the world.

Literacy is always an act of translation, beginning in childhood. We move from primal sensory experience to forms of



representation expressed initially in gesture, then sounds, and finally marks on a page, later differentiated into drawing and writing. This is not, however, a developmental pathway in which we lose all that precedes print literacy, but we continue to move between all of these modalities, including inchoate experience. To understand the meaning of acquiring standard print literacy, we need to understand the acts of translation that are required in that movement between these different modalities.

We need to understand the losses and the gains for individuals and cultural groups in relation to acquiring standard print literacy, and we also need to provide technologies that facilitate those translations. These don't have to be computer-based technologies, but can be as simple as a project book, drawing pencils, simple cameras and pens and the encouragement to follow up on whatever forms of research and questions are relevant. As educators, I suggest we ask: How does understanding literacy as an act of translation help us to provide the bridge for people to cross when they wish to, or when it is appropriate or necessary for them to do so? What do they lose, and what do they gain? How can we walk beside them when they choose to take this step?

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## Note on the paintings

Paintings by Daphne Wallace and her daughter Apena Bamfield from the 'Yurri Yurri Book', Daphne Wallace author.

# Finding the threads for a strong weave

by Maree Keating

**When Feltex Carpets retrenched 165 workers 18 months ago, the retrenched workers began photographing their work and home lives for an exhibition titled 'A Strong Weave'. An oral history was also started, and both the exhibition and the launch of the book Finding the Threads were held exactly 12 months after the retrenchment**

Retrenched textile workers are sometimes described in the media as 'the forgotten' victims of manufacturing restructuring. Through a unique story telling project, Finding the Threads, the Textile Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia (TCFUA) spent 12 months listening to, documenting and celebrating the stories of textile workers' lives. The project shows that it can be a potent experience for people to remember things out loud which the world wishes to forget.

Retrenched textile workers have a profound story to tell. The process of listening to it can challenge non-factory workers' ideas about working life, and highlight the important role of long-term workplaces in creating and sustaining communities.

## Background to the project

In October 2005, Feltex Carpets retrenched 165 process workers from its yarns mill, which had operated for over 60 years in Braybrook, in the Western suburbs of Melbourne. With only 18 days notice, the TCFUA union organisers and the TCFUA RTO staff put together a comprehensive retrenchment support proposal to the company. The company accepted the proposal, which included eight hours of TCFUA organised pre-retrenchment support and information, up to \$2000 a head post-retrenchment training support, and 12 months of full-time post-retrenchment support and advocacy from TCFUA project officers to assist the retrenched workers make informed decisions about their short, medium and longer-term directions, set up targeted training, and leverage funding for other activities to meet the broad needs of the group. (see *Literacy Link*, vol.26, June 2006 for more detail about this project)

From the inception, the TCFUA project workers had discussed the importance of taking a creative, community-based and integrated learning approach to the project. We developed an approach which put the needs and timeframes of the workers first and recognised the role of the Feltex work community in doing that effectively.

In the months following retrenchment, the newly unemployed older Feltex workers were struggling to cope with competing needs. On the one hand, many needed to take time to process what had just happened to them, how to put away or maintain their lifelong work friendships, routines and memories, how

to deal with feelings of being disregarded after decades of loyalty. They had to reconsider what the rest of their lives may hold for them in terms of meaningful activity, relationships, routines—all of which were once created through a single workplace over a lifetime. Having a group of people to laugh at life with every day was suddenly missing. Familiarity and friends were gone.

On the other hand, they also needed to 'get on with it', to pay the bills, to do something to take their mind off things. There were decisions to make, jobs to seek, training to undertake. Many struggled with how to do all this without the support of a peer group that understood where they had come from and who they were.

## The genesis of the storytelling project

The retrenched Feltex workers involved in the project, most of whom were lifelong union members, had fought together long and hard for workplace conditions which gave them a livelihood and a working life full of pride and dignity. This solidarity was ultimately the foundation for the project.

The TCFUA support and advocacy project officers consciously decided to provide opportunities for the retrenched workers to get together, to tell and re-tell their stories over a six to 12 month period. This was a core part of the project model to enable the retrenched workers to process and celebrate their life experiences, to rebuild their work-based relationships out of work and recover and plan with the support of their familiars.

The storytelling project emerged from this project model, and was made possible through the trusting relationships which were built via a program of practical and personal support. We found an experienced and sensitive oral historian and writer, who joined the small union project team for six months, and she became the listener, the scribe and ultimately the wonderfully true conduit for tales that were lived in the bodies and shared in the minds of the group.

It quickly became obvious to us all that the retrenched workers involved in this project were people who deeply understand what it is to belong to a community, who understand what it means to trust and to be trusted, and who understand the unquantifiable value of sharing the laughter and the tears. In the numerous get-togethers, classes and social interactions created

through this 12-month project, there was a spirit of something 'family', something raucous, something outrageously intimate, hilarious, respectful, entertaining and unashamedly loving taking place and being reinforced between the old friends in the room. It is this quality that made the storytelling so precious and important, and which we wanted to capture in the publication.



Telling their stories involved the retrenched workers remembering, and consolidating the values and achievements of a lifetime. It was emotional and satisfying to talk. For the listener it was also emotional. People were celebrating their friendships but also chronicling their losses.

### **The art of listening to stories**

In January 2006, oral historian Tricia Bowen started to attend large get-togethers of retrenched worker and smaller class groups organised by the TCFUA project officers. At these meetings story after story flowed, and Tricia watched and listened. Laughter at 'in jokes', familiar and humorous jibes, sympathy with one another's troubles, shared outrage at the casual and poorly paid work available, listening and problem-solving was always in evidence.

No one tried to stop them or water down their experience. No one told them they just had to move on or any other platitudes.

They got enough of that from office staff in Centrelink, Job Network, and labour hire offices.

These get-togethers always had the unmistakable air of a huge extended family reunion, where everyone had a place and a role to play. Tricia talked to them about her interest in their lives and their stories, and asked if any of them would be willing to meet with her to talk more.

Over a three-month period Tricia visited 15 people in their Western suburbs homes with her tape recorder and stayed for an hour, or sometimes much longer, as they showed her their photos, their gardens, their pets, offered her food and drink, and shared with her stories from their working lives.

Most, although not all, of the participants told stories of immigration to Australia in the 70s and 80s and the challenges of speaking absolutely no English on their first day at work. The patience and care in the workplace for new workers at that time would be hard to find in any of today's factories. One recounted the early days:

Everyone does not speak English ... Sometimes it's only yes and no. Everything was new for me. It seemed too hard. The lady teaching me showed me. You just look and don't do anything. So I just looked, looked and looked and then I started (p.6)

Most had started at Feltex as very young men and women. Some of the Anglo Aussies had started at Feltex when they were as young as 14. Applying for a job then was a different ball game. One said:

I went up there with my sister and I sat down and the supervisor said, 'Are you here about the job?' Then he said, 'You, you and you, you've got the job' It was that easy (p.7)

For many it was their first and only workplace. They could recite every change in management over 20 years and how these changes affected production, conditions and workplace relationships. The relentless noise of the machines made communication a theatrical process, the range of personality types and cultural backgrounds working in the one place required a great diplomacy and respect, whilst the conditions also required that everyone mix in together without being too sensitive.

One anecdote sums up the way that humour served to bond people together:

I had good friends and all day we laughed together. They told jokes and stories and they were always funny. All different nationalities ... so many but we could laugh at the same

jokes. We understood each other. We understood what we were talking about (p.37)

Their conversations with Tricia covered stories about the early days getting used to hard factory work, and in the process building relationships with their workmates, to stories of loyalty to the company and individuals who had helped them, their enormous pride in their work, and humour shared on the factory floor. They spoke openly about the multiple injuries they had sustained and the lack of health and safety provisions over the years. Although some had been permanently injured in the workplace, and had received no compensations, the level of loyalty to the workplace was astounding.



The word ‘family’ was used over and over again as people told their stories. Their loyalty was primarily to each other and to the workplace itself for facilitating those relationships. These stories reveal the extent to which relationships at work transform a workplace into a site of community, something much more than just a place where a production process happens.

I feel like the people, and the place, was kind of like family for me there ... I went home to sleep and I went there to see my friends. I was happy to go to work (p.18)

Turning a collection of rollicking stories into an accessible book

Such projects are not quick. They require the slow building of relationship, trust, the listening and relistening, as well as a great sensitivity in the final selection of the words.

Tricia painstakingly transcribed every word of the 15 stories, staying true to the idioms of speech and individual expression. She then read and re-read the material until themes emerged, and arranged different stories under chapter headings. She pulled out the most poignant of the words, elegant fragments of story, minute snapshots of memory, five-line vignettes, and arranged them under the headings.

The storytellers did not want to be identified with their individual stories, although when the retrenched Feltex workers later read the book, they all guessed who said what. They knew each other too well. The final product reads like a seamless journey and leaves the reader with a strong flavour of the people, their dignified characters and their colourful lives through simply told, emotionally resonant anecdotes and reflections.

The chapter headings Tricia came up with played with references to rugs and carpets, and these idioms later provided interesting language discussions in ESL classes run by the TCFUA for the retrenched Feltex workers:

- Put out the welcome mat—stories of starting out
- Unravelling the threads—stories about the job
- A tightly knit group—the family that formed at Feltex
- Don’t sweep it under the carpet—stories about the working conditions
- Spinning yarns—stories about fun at work
- Don’t pull the wool over our eyes—stories of the strike
- Pulling the rug out from under you—stories about the closure
- Carpet makers to the world: not to be walked over—the future

We commissioned photographer Angela Bailey to take some photographs of the storytellers, and of the (now closed) Feltex workplace. Helena Spyrou then used these images in her design of the neat, four-colour, 64-page A5 book, which takes us through a parallel visual journey of the people, the machines and the stories that made up the Feltex spinning department.

### **A strong weave—that which makes us strong**

There have been many arts projects in recent years showcasing the faces, lives and achievements of workers and other under-recognised groups in the community. We had recently seen a series of portraits of Australian workers as a visual reply to the Workchoices legislation, and were impressed by its beauty. How much more powerful would it be for the workers if the photographs were taken, not by a professional photographer, but by themselves? And what if, instead of the audience looking at pictures of retrenched workers, they were looking at the world as seen through their eyes?

We suggested to a group that we employ Angela Bailey to show them how to frame a good photo and use a camera. Over several weeks they could take photos of anything important to them, using disposable 35 mm cameras. Afterwards, Angela would help them select the best photos and would curate an exhibition of their work, to accompany the launch of the book, *Finding the Threads*.

The photos they brought to the class over the six weeks were of their homes and gardens, pets and neighbourhoods. Many were humorous (such as the one of Maria in the wine barrel and of Zora's doll dressed up and sitting on the couch), and all showed how meticulously the women kept their homes and the pride they took in being good home makers.



Angela worked with the group and their photos for several months, and contributed a selection of her own stunning photographs of some of the abandoned spinning machines and equipment at the Braybrook site. The photos were finally laminated and hung for several weeks at the Deer Park Community Arts Centre. We called the exhibition *A Strong Weave* to focus attention on what held individual workers together, and kept them strong in the aftermath of a traumatic retrenchment.

### **The launch—one last get-together**

Throughout 2006 we discussed with the retrenched workers the specific and broader objectives of Tricia writing up their stories and the TCFUA publishing them as a book. The book would be a memento for each of them to celebrate their working lives. The book and the photo exhibition that would accompany its launch aimed to inform the wider community of their long service to the textile industry and also to raise awareness of the human impact of casual, unstable work on older worker communities. There was a huge excitement about having a proper launch, about having a big public event which celebrated their experiences and their relationships.

The launch of the book took place in October 2006, exactly 12 months after the retrenchment. The symbolism of this as a commemoration was not lost on the group. Around 100 of the original 165 retrenched Feltex workers came to the launch, dressed in their finery. They marvelled at the photographs of their old workplace, as well as those of fellow workmates and their private lives. Again, this feeling of 'intensely comfortable family gathering' permeated the event. Champagne and hors d'oeuvres were passed around, Joan Kirner gave a fantastic speech about workers, the mayor was there. A professional

soundtrack of the machine sounds heard inside a textile factory was played in one of the rooms to the delight of some and the laughing criticism of others: 'Some things we do wish to forget from that place!'

### **Using the book as a resource**

As they left the launch, everyone got a copy of the book, and people were moved by how visually beautiful it was and how easily their stories read. They were proud. They had become celebrities. For two weeks there were constant local newspaper stories about the launch and the project.

An ESL class was set up for a group of ten retrenched Feltex workers by their request, to run from October 2006 until May 2007 at the Sunshine campus of Victoria University. It is still being run now by the TCFUA RTO, from the training funding provided by Feltex. Last year we used a class set of the book and the newspaper articles to discuss language in the media, and themes such as arrival in Australia, workplace conditions, the role of humour, and the impact of *Workchoices* on the workplace, especially for casual employees. Other teachers from the TCFUA RTO have started using the book with their outworker and factory worker classes to stimulate discussion and promote reading skills and storytelling.

### **Postscript on the industry**

The last 17 years has witnessed the gradual decline of Australian-based textile, clothing and footwear manufacturing. As each new reduction in tariffs has been announced since 1989, a corresponding wave of middle-aged manufacturing workers has been cast out of its long-term, familiar workplace into the unknown. Most workplaces are small, consisting of 10–50 workers. Others, like Feltex, employ hundreds of workers. Gale Pacific, Yakka, Feltex and Blundstones are just some of the major iconic Australian TCF companies that have decided to significantly downsize Australian manufacturing operations and move offshore in the past two years.

In the past decade many workers have been reabsorbed into the casual or short-term work available in the manufacturing industry only to experience repeated retrenchments, and many others have disappeared off the employment statistics altogether and become permanently lost to the workforce. The reasons for this have been well documented; lack of accessible, broad-based retraining options, lack of confidence and know how to look for stable work outside of manufacturing, and English language barriers are but a few.

The TCFUA has tirelessly advocated on behalf of these retrenched workers, as well as home-based clothing workers (homeworkers), to gain government support to access training, support, incentives and options. It continues to do so through

**Continued on page 32 ...**

# Have a spell: positive approaches to teaching spelling

In this short and fascinating article Bronwen Hickman invites you to 'Have a Spell', offer ideas and tips on how to create interesting and intriguing spelling lessons.

Got to tackle some spelling? Having difficulty? If you've come up through the 'spelling doesn't make sense' school of teaching, it's not easy—but if you're willing to work at it, you have a lot of pleasure ahead. There are great books that help you with background information (see list below). David Crystal's *Encyclopaedia of the English Language* is full of interesting facts and details that will open your eyes.

Other writers have told the story of how the English language developed. There was Henry Sweet, whose work on the sounds of English became the basis of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), and who is supposed to have been the model for Professor Henry Higgins in *My Fair Lady*. And there was Ernest Weekley, who did a fascinating track of the history of English, while his wife was dallying with D.H. Lawrence and eventually ran away with him! (They led interesting lives, these linguists!).

In my opinion, no teacher should be allowed near a spelling classroom unless equipped with an Oxford Dictionary. The Concise Oxford (or the Australian Concise) is great; the two-volume Shorter Oxford is *seriously* great (one area where bigger is definitely better). It's because the Oxford is a historical dictionary—it tells you the origin of a word, and that goes a long way towards explaining why it is written as it is. It teaches you things you never knew about words. But while you need the Oxford, the students might manage better with a more accessible dictionary—the Heinemann for example.

### Teach them the history

When you learn English, you get a bonus—you're getting four languages in one—(Anglo-Saxon) English, French, Greek, Latin—and on good days, bits of a few dozen other languages as well. Anything you can explain about the history (see list of books below) will help make sense of variations.

If students don't understand why it's sometimes 'miss' and sometimes 'mis-', a dash of history helps. The 'miss'—failing to catch the bus, or the short form for 'mistress'—is good old basic Anglo-Saxon English, before Latin came along with its 'mis-' prefix for things going badly. Help students find them in the dictionary and use them in a sentence, to get them really clear.

While history in general is about not repeating the mistakes of the past, the history of English spelling is about *understanding* the mistakes of the past. No-one controls the way a language develops. Why—after almost three centuries after 1066 with French as the official language—did Anglo-Saxon English reassert itself (thank you, Mr. Chaucer!) as the language of the people of England? It was able to adapt, to take on new words for new lifestyles, new ideas. So the French, who could never manage the throaty 'gh' (which sounded rather like the German 'ch' as in *nacht*), made it an 'f' sound in some parts of the country—tough, enough—and just stopped pronouncing it in others (through, plough). Deal with them! Invite the students to help make a list. (Give them '-ight' to get them started, and get them to go through the alphabet adding as many first letters as possible.) Then think about past tenses: caught, bought, etc. Collect them, write them, say them—you could find more than 40 of them. Take the students through them. This is the history—this was the compromise—this is how we write and say them now.

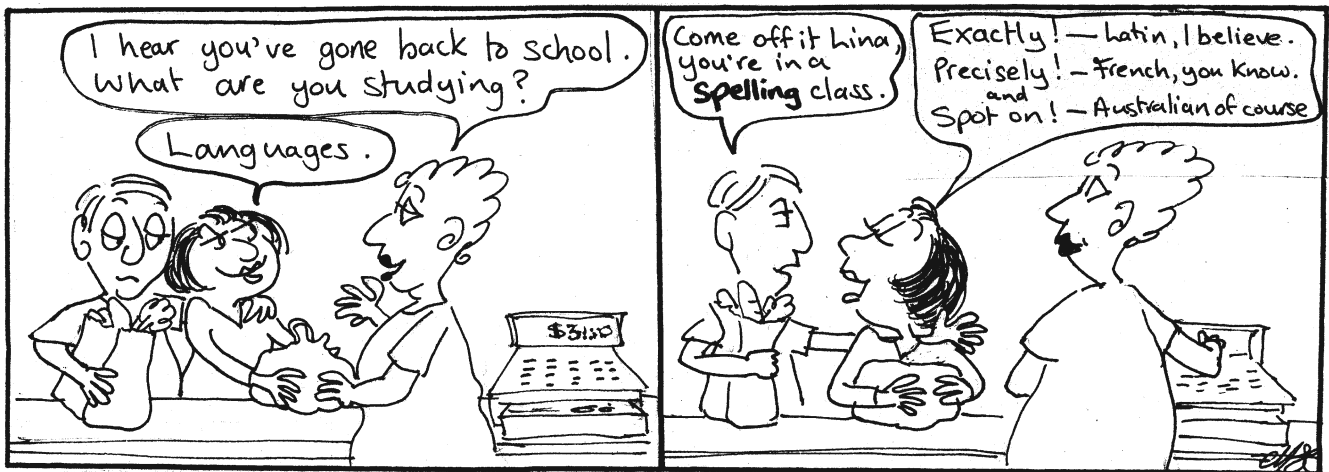
It's hard to separate the logic of English from its history. Making the 'y' change to 'i' when it is no longer at the end was a master stroke that provided one rule for words from four different languages—Anglo-Saxon English, French, Latin and Greek—with only a few words to break the pattern (dye-dyeing-dyed, to separate words about changing colour from words about death). Of course we can't stop the French from calling their sauce *mayonnaise* and giving us a 'y' in the middle that doesn't respond to the rules, but what can you do—they're French!

### Show them the logic

Don't give up on difficult words. See if you can find out why they are like they are. Remember, if it isn't logical to you, it won't be logical to them. Double consonants are a good place to start. Show them how we get double letters. Take them through the short and long vowel sounds and the patterns that go with them. There are tape-and-book sets (Baker 1992) that will help ESL learners to get the sounds right, and exercises (Hickman, 2005) to help all students get the spelling sorted out. We also get double letters at the joins when we add a prefix or suffix to a word. We need all the letters of both—so unnatural, drunkenness, anti-intellectual, etc.



# Practical matters



Words with 'ss' come from Latin verbs. The most common are from *mittere/mission*, to send, which is why we get both forms—submit, submission. The others are *cess-*, *pass-*, *gress-*, *press-*, *cuss-*, *sess-* and *fess-*. They give us about 30 words in all.

## Give them the skills

Use dictionaries in class—let students feel at home with finding things in the dictionary. Start them on the silent 'w' words—all in the one spot, in front of the letter 'r'. Take them through the list, from 'wrangle' to 'wry'. Many aren't used much now, but you can work on a list of useful ones. And silent 'k' words—all in front of 'n'—'knack' to 'knuckle-dusters'. In each case there are less than 20 that we use regularly. Tell them about how the Anglo-Saxons used to pronounce every letter. They'll love, 'Don't get your knickers in a knot!'

Bring in word-building. They'll need to practice short and long vowel sounds. Help them hear and understand them by making their own. Read out a dozen or so short-vowel-sound words (can—fin—hat—hop—hug—plan—slim—stop—mat—hid—slid—fat) for them to write in a column, then get them to write them all again with an 'e' at the end and say both sounds.

Practise endings: putting 'ous' on words to make adjectives (hazardous, famous). They'll need the 'drop-silent-'e'-before-adding-ing-etc.' rule before they get to this. Whereas '-ous' makes adjectives, '-us' is for Latin words and they're nouns (circus, hibiscus, radius).

## Help them enjoy words

Adult students *know* lots of words, especially if they are native speakers or have lived here a long time. They just might have trouble writing them. Activities that focus on knowing the word—like a quiz made up of words ending in -ology—can confirm their good vocabulary skills without suffering. And

when they know that the ending is always spelt the same, there is less drama about spelling the rest of the word.

Choosing the right word to fill a space or match a clue is a good way to go. That way they use their vocabulary skills (knowing what the word means) with some initial help (knowing how to write it). Then extend them into writing sentences (knowing how to use it) to make the words their own.

## Tell them the stories

Lots of words have interesting stories. Try the ones connected to people's names (there are whole dictionaries devoted to them). Start with gypsy, cardigan, boycott, saxophone.

If you can't find a reason for things, be creative. Faced with the problem of not knowing why we drop one 'l' when we write 'careful', I tell my students that little words like 'full' don't need the extra crutch when they have something to lean on.

And making up stories—well, mnemonics—to help them remember how to spell words is always fun. I'm grateful to a student who told me how she remembers the spelling of weather: wet every afternoon. And my all-time favourite, supplied by a colleague, will help you always to be able to spell diarrhoea: dunny-in-a-real-rush, hurry-or-else-accident.

When faced with tricky words, like the words that sound the same and mean different things: be mature and reasonable—blame the French! After all, they gave us 'fete' when we already had 'fate' (which they'd given us hundreds of years earlier), causing us trouble with these and many other homophones.

## Teach them to explore

The Oxford teaches you things you never knew about words, like what clever things prefixes are. They open doors, turn on

# Practical matters

lights—they're powerful, passionate. They reverse meanings (necessary, unnecessary), they change direction (immigration, emigration), they give a multitude of meanings to one basic idea (commit, submit, remit, admit, permit—all about sending). They're a key to so much of what we write, and party to the secret of successful spelling.

Prefixes are also remarkably assimilated. Try following the trail from 'ad-' in the Concise Oxford, the most powerful two-letter combination in the Latin lexicon, to see how that little 'to' and 'towards' idea turns up in so many guises in so many words.

And this blends in nicely with learning about doubled letters too—try migrate, emigrate, immigrate!

Once you embark on this fascinating journey, you'll want to discard the 'memorise ten words a day for a spelling test' approach. Get them involved, and let one session give them 1000 words!

**Bronwen Hickman teaches spelling and other things at CAE. She is the author of *Spelling Well* and is writing a book for adult learners about the story of English spelling.**

## Interesting books

Baker, A. (1992), *Ship or Sheep*, UK: Cambridge University Press. Students can listen to a beautifully-spoken voice pronouncing the sounds clearly while they look at them in print.

Bryson, W. (1990), *Mother Tongue*, UK: Penguin. An easy-to-read narrative telling the story of the English language.

Crystal, D. (1995), *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of the English Language*. Gives the origins and history of English, and has sections on vocabulary, grammar, and spoken and written English. Written in short, entertaining sections and beautifully illustrated.

Hickman, B. (2005), *Spelling Well*, Melbourne: CAE. A workbook for adults, with explanations, exercises and answers.

McCrum, R., Cran, W., & McNeil, R. (2002), *The Story of English*, London: Faber. The book of the popular TV series on SBS, it covers the rise of English all around the world, and the chapter on the development of English is particularly good. Well illustrated.

Weekley, E. (1952), *The English Language*, London: Deutsch. A scholarly history of the language, with many fascinating examples of the way English has changed over the years, and where our words have come from.

... continued from page 7

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# Technology Matters

Welcome to our new section, **Technology Matters**. This is a not just an upmarket version of **Practical Matters**. As our first contributor, **Debbie Soccio** writes, **the world is changing and we need to change with it, and 'whether we like it or not; whether we hide and pretend it's not something we need to know about, it is not going to go away. It is time we found out more. Technology does matter!'**

Each edition of **Technology Matters** will feature something new about using technology in the classroom—a new idea focused around giving you the skill and knowledge to understand new changes, new inventions, new applications that you might be able to embed into your classes.

In this first edition we've decided to start by providing you with a basic dictionary that includes some of the more recent buzz words about different software applications that are being termed new learning technologies. Many of these applications and software packages are readily available on the internet. Some are attached to application packages (like Microsoft). Some come attached to the phone or computer that you buy. Find one that interests you and have a look for more information on the internet. You'll be surprised at how easy some of them are to use!

## Blogs

Weblogs, or blogs as they are called for short, can be easily created and updated by even those with very little technology confidence and know-how. A blog is a personal diary. A collection of links. Your own private thoughts. A political soapbox. A place to collaborate.

A blog can be whatever you want it to be. There are millions of them, and there are really no rules to owning one. It can help you keep track of the increasing number of resources coming online, making it easier to filter what you want to keep a record of.

In simple terms, a blog is a website where you write on an ongoing basis. New postings appear at the top, so anyone accessing the blog can read what's new. They are then free to comment or to email you, if they wish.

And it's not just text. Blogs can display pictures and video, include audio and Flash, and even store files like PowerPoint presentations or Excel spreadsheets for linking.

To have a go, try [www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com)

## Bluetooth

Look around you at the moment. You probably have your keyboard connected to the computer, as well as a printer, mouse, monitor and so on. What (literally) joins all of these together?

Cables connect them. Cables have become the bane of many offices, classrooms and homes. Most of us have experienced the joys of trying to figure out what cable goes where, and getting tangled up in the details. Bluetooth essentially aims to fix this—it is a cable-replacement technology.

A Bluetooth chip is designed to replace cables by taking the information normally carried by the cable and transmitting it at a special frequency to a receiver Bluetooth chip, which will then give the information received to the computer or mobile device.

## Digital stories

Digital stories provide a balance between good storytelling skills and a sophisticated grasp of the creative potential of a new set of digital tools. Yet they are easy enough for anyone to master.

Digital stories can be the combination of text, picture and graphics, video, voice and music to create media-rich stories which can be used in a variety of ways.

Through the use of computer-based programs like Windows Movie Maker, Windows Photostory, I-books, Adobe Premier and Pinnacle, short two-minute or three-minute video productions can be made and used to describe personal events and memories. In more recent times, digital stories are being used in educational settings to demonstrate teaching points, and to record student participation and demonstrations.

If you are running Windows XP or greater, you can get free downloads of Windows Movie Maker and Windows Photostory at [www.microsoft.com](http://www.microsoft.com).

## Mobile learning

Mobile learning, sometimes called m-learning, is learning accomplished with the use of small portable computing devices. These computing devices may include smartphones, personal digital assistants (PDAs) and similar handheld devices.

## Myspace

Meet people from your area in the country and keep in touch. The site allows you to easily establish your own personal web page, with a difference. Myspace provides that link to your online community. It includes a blog, access to forums, sending and receiving emails, games and events.

Try it at [www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com)

## Podcasts

Did you know that the New Oxford American Dictionary has declared the term 'podcast' Word of the Year? Podcasts have become popular because anyone with a microphone, computer, software and a net connection, can produce one themselves.

The term is defined as 'digital recording of a radio broadcast or similar program, made available on the internet for downloading to a personal audio player'. Basically, this means taking a sound or recording that you might have downloaded from the internet and either saved to your computer or transferred to an mp3 player.

Even though the word podcast is a blend of broadcast and I-pod, you don't have to own an I-pod to podcast. You can podcast (make a recording of and transfer an audio file) to any portable MP3 player.

Have a listen to some podcasts at [www.bbc.uk.com](http://www.bbc.uk.com) or [www.abc.com.au](http://www.abc.com.au)

## SKYPE

This software allows you to talk to anyone in the world. It is a free program that enables you to speak (just like a telephone) to anyone who is also logged into SKYPE. It doesn't cost anything (well, not in the traditional way a phone call does), but it does eat into your internet download time.

Try it at [www.skype.com](http://www.skype.com)

## Social software

Some use this as a term for any computer software that supports group communications across networks. In that sense it encompasses chat rooms, mailing lists, online gaming communities, Usenet newsgroups, weblogs (blogs) and more.

Others would like to limit it to newer software where the emphasis is on the community rather than the technology that makes it possible, and which is adaptable to the ways in which people want to interact rather than imposing a structure on them.

It is broadly used to describe the use of two or more modes of computer-mediated communication. In this view, people form online communities by combining one-to-one (such as email and instant messaging), one-to-many (webpages and blogs), and many-to-many (wikis) communication modes.

## Virtual classrooms

Virtual classrooms, or virtual meeting spaces, allow groups of people to come online at a set period of time to join into

a meeting, a professional development forum or to conduct a distance-based class. Typically, they allow people to have two-way conversations, that is, talk, quite similar to a telephone conversation in real time. You can also show slides, websites, pictures and write on the whiteboard. Some virtual classroom spaces you may have heard of are Elluminate, Centra, Live Classroom, I-vocalise.

For more information on this, or to have a go, why not join ACAL's Literacy Live Forums that will be conducted once per month during the first six months of 2007? Go to [www.acal.edu.au](http://www.acal.edu.au) for more information.

## Web 2.0

We've had access to the web for quite a few years now, and as time passes its power continues to grow. We started by thinking that sending and receiving an email was pretty amazing. Now, with the upgrade in software and the ingenuity of its more frequent users, we are seeing the concept of 'Web2.0' software occurring.

In Web 1.0, we double-clicked, we sent an email and waited for a reply, we created our own personal websites, we loaded Encyclopaedia Britannica from the CD-Rom, we sent a photo by email. Now, with Web 2.0, we download music directly from the web, we search wikipedia for information, we blog with others, we participate in communities online, we use Flickr to store our photographs online.

## Wiki

A wiki is a piece of server software that allows users to freely create and edit web page content using any web browser. Wikis support hyperlinks and have a simple text syntax for creating new pages and crosslinks between internal pages.

Wikis are an 'open editing' tool. They allow everyday users to create and edit any page in a website. They encourage democratic use of the web and promote content composition by non-technical users.

Try it at [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)

## YouTube

YouTube is a popular free video sharing website which lets users upload, view, and share video clips. The wide variety of site content includes movie and TV clips and music videos, as well as amateur content such as videoblogging and short original videos.

Try it at [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

Debbie Soccio has worked in the adult literacy field for 16 years and has a particular interest in developing blended learning programs for students who choose to study flexibly.

# Open Forum

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

With the recent reaccreditation of the Certificates in General Education for Adults (CGEA) we see Fine Print as providing an important forum for issues, reflections and suggestions by those involved in or affected by the implementation of the new CGEA.

Whether you are a teacher, administrator, student or researcher, we welcome your comments.

The Victorian Qualifications Authority thinks anyone with a Certificate IV can teach the CGEA and this inconsistency, writes Dianne Parslow, must be addressed. And after last September's successful CGEA forum came the VALBEC Practical Matters workshop in November, where committee members and practitioners discussed the issues around implementing the new CGEA. Lynne Matheson was there.

## Qualifications for CGEA teachers

According to the new CGEA curriculum, the minimum qualification required to teach and assess literacy and numeracy is the infamous Certificate IV<sup>1</sup> that we have all acquired recently. This qualification has one optional unit which covers language, literacy and numeracy. This is not enough to be a competent adult literacy teacher.

The curriculum specifies qualifications for assessing, and later qualifications for teaching. To assess units from the CGEA the only qualification necessary is a Certificate IV, plus the assessor must hold the relevant vocational competencies. To teach the units from the CGEA, the new curriculum states that teachers must have Certificate IV and recommends that those teaching core skills have specialist training. In 2004, when the ESL framework was reaccredited, the curriculum specified that teachers must be tertiary-qualified ESL teachers. This suggests that literacy and numeracy are easier to teach than ESL, and is a significant downgrading of our profession.

To teach in the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP), teachers must have a tertiary teaching qualification with a TESOL method. To teach in the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Programme (LLNP), a teacher must have a tertiary teaching qualification, preferably with units of study and/or experience in teaching adult literacy and numeracy. The minimum qualification for teaching the CGEA should also be a tertiary teaching qualification, not just the Certificate IV.

Page 63 of part B of the CGEA document outlines the 'Desirable skills and knowledge', which includes:

- adult literacy pedagogy, including coverage of psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, humanistic/progressivist pedagogy, critical pedagogy, discourse theory
- adult numeracy pedagogy, including critical literacy/numeracy

- sociocultural factors affecting literacy learning, including language as a social and cultural phenomenon, importance of context, language of power, role of literacy in allowing or denying access to education, employment, services and impacts on health
- applied linguistics; for example, the conventions of formal English in a range of genres, an understanding of the behaviour and needs of learners in a multilingual and multicultural learning environment, code switching and use of various English dialects (including Aboriginal English), text analysis: how to analyse the linguistic structure of a text to identify problems and build skill development.

This is a vast body of knowledge which can certainly enhance a teacher's understanding and ability in the classroom, and yet this knowledge is only desirable, not compulsory. This list covers the qualifications that most of us have, and I feel that teaching adult literacy and numeracy without at least some of these skills and knowledge is not to be encouraged.

In 2001 a report carried out by TAFE NSW showed that a large number of teachers in the area had postgraduate qualifications, including studies in adult literacy, adult education or TESOL. The report states that most of these qualifications were gained in the 1990s as the adult literacy and numeracy field grew. These were teachers who had previously qualified as primary or secondary teachers, but realised that working in adult literacy and numeracy required more training to enhance their knowledge and understanding of the needs of this specific group of learners.

We have now become a very well-educated group with professional organisations such as VALBEC and ACAL to ensure that we keep up with current research in the area and undertake professional development.

In 2004, McKenna and Fitzpatrick reported that:

The teaching workforce in adult literacy again reflects its relatively marginal standing, in relation to teacher type, qualification requirements and availability, and professional development opportunities

Australia does seem to have progressed beyond a workforce of volunteers in the adult literacy area, but we are still seeking to reinforce the fact that not anyone can teach literacy, and that a competent adult literacy teacher needs specific qualifications, just as they do in primary and secondary teaching.

Many CGEA teachers are striving for higher levels of education and professional development, while the Victorian Qualifications Authority feels that anyone with Certificate IV is capable of teaching and assessing the CGEA. This is inconsistent with the requirement for higher-level qualifications to teach AMEP, LLNP or ESL Framework. This inconsistency needs to be addressed.

## A walk around the new CGEA

The VALBEC committee decided to conduct this session along similar lines to the successful CGEA forum held in September. Dave Tout and Corinna Ridley gave a presentation of an overview of changes to the certificates. This was followed by group discussions based on a set of questions, and facilitated by VALBEC committee members. This was a deliberate strategy to engage members in discussion about the issues around implementation of the new CGEA, while drawing on the expertise and knowledge of experienced practitioners in the groups. Many had attended the CMM information sessions and had been involved in consultations and providing feedback during the course of the CGEA reaccreditation project.

The workshop provided an opportunity for practitioners to air their concerns, and to identify the main professional development requirements for implementing the new CGEA to support practitioners and program managers in the shift to the new curriculum. The outcomes have been passed on to the CMM and will be used to cooperatively plan professional development activities for 2007.

Some providers are starting the process of implementing the new CGEA in January 2007, while others will be looking at a more gradual transition. Further areas requiring clarification and additional resources will no doubt surface during the year as providers grapple with the detail of the new credentials,

After working in TAFEs for many years, Dianne Parslow recently took up the position of literacy coordinator at CAE. Dianne was involved in the reaccreditation of the ESL framework, and part of the team that wrote the numeracy units for the new CGEA.

### Note

- 1 Certificate IV in TAA (Training and Assessment) or Certificate IV in AWT (Assessment and Workplace Training).

### References

- Adult literacy and numeracy practices 2001: a national snapshot, Commonwealth of Australia, <http://www.staff.vu.edu.au/alnarc/publications/01nswfinalreport.pdf>
- Certificates in General Education for Adults, 2006, Department of Education and Training, Victoria.
- McKenna, R & Fitzpatrick, L. (2004), Building sustainable adult literacy provision: A review of international trends in adult literacy policy and programs, NCVET, <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1515.html>

but there was a positive sense of being able to build on existing skills and expertise in VALBEC to form supportive 'communities of practice' as an outcome of this workshop.

### Identifying PD needs of moving from the old to the new

#### Practical concerns

The first area of concern was around the size of units and how to accommodate floating student populations. Would the traditional longer-term students still be catered for? Would the alignment of smaller units prove workable for those students with shaky attendance records? Time will tell. Transition arrangements for existing students need to be clear so students do not feel disadvantaged by the introduction of the new certificates.

Some saw the risk of over-assessment as an issue, with the introduction of smaller units and new assessment requirements, and the whole area of record keeping for these assessments was seen as a huge burden. A centralised access mechanism—such as a website providing a platform for sharing templates—would be invaluable. Development of such support materials was a question that came up time and again. It was hoped that there would be appropriate funding to do this in light of the increased levels of record keeping and accountability required for the new certificates. Suggestions included ways of developing and sharing templates for

mapping old and new units, timetabling strategies, enrolment formats, sample assessment tasks, exemplars of integrated assessment tasks, learning plan formats and moderation coversheets.

At the administrative level the fundamental question of how to put together courses to meet ACFE/Centrelink reporting requirements was raised, followed by tracking for AVETMISS records and the conundrums of a rolling intake. Not forgetting the audit requirements for scope of registration changes and the checklists of checklists ...

### **Introducing new units**

The disappearance of the General Curriculum Options (GCO), lamented by many, was identified as an area for PD in order to work out ways that course content previously delivered under the GCO umbrella could be matched or aligned with new units to retain the flexibility and range of activities previously encompassed by the credential.

The time taken to develop individual learning plans (ILP) was seen as potentially problematic with open-door enrolments in most ACE centres. Most practitioners welcomed the concept and have worked with similar processes in the past, and it was seen as a good thing to highlight and recognise the ILP as integral to adult learning. Ways of linking this to the initial assessment and placement interview, or of integrating it with other class work, were seen as areas to explore.

In the discussions around numeracy, the introduction of smaller units raised the concern that there may be a temptation to go back to a 'chapters of the maths book' approach. There was a need for experienced practitioners to share the philosophy behind their pedagogy, and provide an emphasis on pathways and flexibility in strategies for developing numeracy skills. The shortage of numeracy practitioners was also of concern, and how support could be provided when there are few specialist teachers with this expertise.

### **Elective units**

Concern around the electives centred on how to build oracy back into the curriculum, and whether there was adequate scope to build in specific themes such as science and humanities. Some providers using the CGEA for ESL requested guidance in identifying suitable oral communication units to import (for example, from the ESL frameworks).

The use of modules from training packages (TP) raised issues of how targeted/specific workplace tasks could be made available in a literacy and numeracy context (such as a community house setting). Previous difficulties experienced by practitioners navigating the National Training Information

System (NTIS) raised questions about how to locate, access and resource appropriate TP units, along with the question of how to match these to appropriate literacy and numeracy levels and plan for pathways to subsequent levels.

Examples of TP units and how they can be integrated would help supplement limited experience in the field of using TP units, and encourage people to explore additional options for students.

The computer units were seen as offering a limited range and allocation of hours with the potential of specialised courses crossover.

### **Other concerns**

Changes in assessment requirements (dubbed the Rule of 3) was an area where further clarification was needed along with support to develop integrated assessment practices, including portfolio-based assessment. The related question of how to integrate learning outcomes from new units such as Complete a Project, and how to document multiple outcomes from integrated tasks, was also raised.

The question of embedded employability skills was also an area that raised concerns, with practitioners querying just how to teach them and in turn how to document them and at what levels.

### **Sharing the load**

What kinds of resources and professional development are people looking for? There was confidence expressed that the CMM will be working with ACFE to ensure the transition period is well managed and resourced. However, a range of additional funded projects will also be required to support practitioners in delivery of the new curriculum.

It was acknowledged that there is a vast wealth of experience and expertise to draw on within VALBEC and the wider ALBE field. In addition to the need for workshops and resource development projects, the idea of establishing communities of practice where practitioners get together with a particular focus to share ideas, develop resources and modify existing templates was strongly supported. Using this expertise in creative ways was part of the final discussion, and several people volunteered to plan, lead and participate in sessions in this mode organised by VALBEC in the coming year. However, additional funding will be required to encourage widespread active participation in these communities of practice by a broad spectrum of practitioners, as well as the dissemination of outcomes resulting from their work.

The idea of working groups was proposed as an alternative to workshop or forums presentations that will be acted on by VALBEC.

## Recommendations

- An initial review of existing resources be conducted to establish which of the existing suite of resources are the most useful, which of these can be most readily adapted to meet the requirements of the new certificates, and which would be most useful provided electronically to enable adaptation to meet the needs of local delivery models.
- The existing CGEA website (originally developed by ARIS) to be redeveloped and used as a portal for sharing information, templates, forms and resources.
- A funded network for providers and practitioners that would establish communities of practice and also support moderation processes.
- Targeted science PD sessions to provide a greater skills base for the electives in this area.
- Workshops around portfolio development and portfolio-based assessment practices as an integral component of the learning process.
- Second semester PD targeted at coordinators, addressing administrative issues with mapped curriculum examples as guides.

At the conclusion of this workshop it was emphasised that the key to the success of the PD program is the need for it to be gradual and staged, and that *all* materials resulting from professional development activities are made available on a website for future access.

Centralised PD is more practicable, but there is a place for localised sessions in regional areas. For many practitioners, time and travel difficulties are acknowledged as barriers to participation. Hopefully the VALBEC Practical Matters sessions planned for May 3 and the Living Literacies conference on May 4 will provide professional development opportunities for many VALBEC members.

Thanks to all those people who attended this workshop and contributed their ideas and comments. I hope that this report accurately represents the summaries of each group discussion.

**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.**

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# 2007 ACAL Conference

ACAL is pleased to announce that the **ACAL Conference for 2007** will be held in **Auckland, New Zealand** on **28 and 29 September**.

The Conference is being co-hosted by *Workbase (NZ)* in collaboration with *Literacy Aotearoa* and the *National Association of ESOL Home Tutors*.

Future editions of *Literacy Link* and *ACAL eNews* will have more details.

The ACAL web site, [www.acal.edu.au](http://www.acal.edu.au) will have conference links.

Possible topics:

- *Professional development using a cluster approach*
- *National baseline qualifications for literacy practitioners*
- *Integrated literacy with industry training organisations*
- *Indigenous literacy initiatives*
- *Family literacy initiatives*
- *New data from the Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey*

A Call for Papers will be issued shortly by ACAL and Workbase



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# Foreign Correspondence

## ALBE in Canada

**Canada's vast expanses mean there is a demand for distance education. Debbie Soccio visited Canada and studied the education system, and now presents a detailed overview of the traditional formal educational institutions and the extensive online delivery available for literacy and basic skills.**

### Background

Currently, Toronto's population of five million is steadily increasing at the rate of six per cent. Toronto City is made up of six super cities (which form the Greater Toronto Area). Distance from one end of Greater Toronto to the other is over 250km. Each super city has a population of close to one million people. Within each Greater Toronto City, there are a number of school board councils who govern and support all education to university level.

Financially, Canada is booming. The economy is growing and the unemployment level is very low. Even with no formal education, one can find work very easily in unqualified, low paying entry level jobs. In fact, as Canada booms in some locations (mining, oil sands project in Calgary and Athabasca), unskilled labourers can earn more than what skilled labourers are being paid in Ontario. (As a result of this large-scale mining project, there is a building boom, with the local population increasing at a rate of 30 per cent). At the moment, anyone can get work as long as they are prepared to travel to another province.

Canada also experiences enormous influxes of new residents, many from backgrounds where English is not the first language. Increased issues in relation to settlement and assimilation with new cultures are some areas that the local municipalities are tackling as a result of fast, increased cohorts of new residents.

### How the education system works in Ontario

The primary (elementary) and secondary (junior and senior) years and all adult community and further education programs delivered by voluntary or ACFE-type organisations, are administered directly by regional school board councils. This includes the employment of staff, the dissemination of funds and the administration of all educational requirements.

To graduate from secondary school (Year 12), all students must complete final state-set exams in every curriculum subject they undertake in the final year of study. The final graduation certificate is awarded on the basis of credit points achieved by the students through course work and final examinations.

Even students who are undertaking alternative forms of study in the final year of school (or are struggling) are still required to complete the same standardised exams and required number of credit points to achieve a Year 12 certificate.

The Canadian post-compulsory education system is predominantly governed by the following:

- (Community) Colleges—which offer diploma-level programs, using more trade oriented, hands-on, and skill-based approaches and offering two-year diplomas
- Universities—which offer degree-level programs

There is much less evidence of apprenticeship-based program delivery, and much more emphasis on the academic educational pathways within colleges. It is also difficult to find a comparative example of work-based traineeships in colleges. Basically, there seemed to be three options available:

- Work—no ongoing education occurring
- College—education focussing on skill-based training
- University—academic education opportunities.

It was quite evident that Canadians prioritise the completion of an academic degree as high ranking for their children and the community.

University entrance is often based on application and ability to pay. However, there is no ENTER score system in place, such as exists in Victoria at present.

### Literacy and basic skills in community colleges and the community

The community college system has been in operation for over 35 years, and its main aim has been to bridge the gap for those people who can't get into university. It is acknowledged that a basic diploma is often the stepping stone into an applied degree program, and that to get a job that pays higher than base wages, a greater qualification is required by the worker.

A certain shift is occurring in the dropping, or renaming, of community colleges to 'Institutes of Technology and Arts' or 'Institutes of Applied Learning'.

Bridging programs offering literacy and basic skills (LBS) are offered across Ontario through:

- Community colleges
- The regional school boards
- Community-based sectors (such as libraries, YMCA and support organisations)

Canada faces the same problems as Australia in relation to no more money being made available to support the increasing school dropout rate—the increase in early school leavers with the gap widening between those without a high school diploma and wanting entrance to diploma courses in colleges. In addition, the increase in non-English-speaking students has been dramatic.

Further, there is a distinct increase in entry-level qualifications required to get into many community college diplomas. For example, the entry-level qualification now requires a grade 12 English and maths level. This is a direct flow-on effect from the following example: evidence shows that a nurse graduating with a three-year diploma is not qualified enough to do the job (when finally employed). To ensure that the nurse can do the job, the qualification is upgraded to a degree (rather than a diploma) and thus the entrance requirements are increased.

In community colleges the majority of LBS programs are offered as bridging programs to enable students who do not have a high school diploma access to community college diplomas.

All students entering community colleges who do not have a high school diploma must sit an entrance test (basic literacy and numeracy skills) to determine their current skill level. If they are recorded as below the entrance level for the discipline-specific program level, they may be offered a place in a bridging LBS program.

The focus of the LBS program is to prepare the student for entrance into their preferred discipline. A few years ago, there was a shift of funding and the emphasis was taken away from literacy and basic skills and placed on academic English/preparation. Many colleges now use literacy and basic skills for preparation for further study.

### **Delivery of LBS**

LBS is delivered without formalised accredited curriculum or student contact hour completion requirements. Basically, the provider acknowledges delivery of the hours and the funding organisation is happy to continue funding.

Many colleges offer different levels of classes, with emphasis on the ESL or literacy needs of the students. Generally up

to three levels of literacy and numeracy skills classes will be offered. Students would be expected to demonstrate success (a demonstration that they can use the information). At the end of each level a final exam is conducted, which students must pass to pass the LBS program. Bear in mind, the key push for participating in the college LBS program is to prepare for and pass the college entrance exam for entry into a discipline-based program. At one college, 90 per cent of students who finish the highest level LBS course go on to sit the college-based tests in English and Maths.

If a student does not make adequate progress, they are invited to continue for a short period of time. If no further progress is made, the student is often referred to a voluntary (community-based) literacy program, which is often a community-based program run in libraries, the YMCA, or by local social groups like Rotary.

### **Online delivery and LBS**

Given Canada's enormous geographical coverage and its very cold climate, educational institutes have dedicated a lot of time to developing access for all in regards to education. As a country Canada is highly regarded in the delivery of distance education programs. These programs may be delivered by print-based means, fully online delivery or a mixture of face-to-face and other mode of delivery.

### **The Independent Learning Centre**

The Independent Learning Centre (ILC) provides a distance education program in English and French for Ontario residents who want to earn the General Education Development (GED) by gaining successful completion in their secondary school diploma credits, upgrade basic skills, or study for personal development. The ILC also offers an elementary program for children temporarily living outside Canada. The ILC currently has 20,000 students.

Recently the ILC was transferred from the Ontario Ministry of Education to TVOntario as part of the government's commitment to enhance lifelong learning through the creation of a distance education network in Ontario.

The ILC offers over 70 Ontario Ministry of Education high school credit courses from Years 9 to 12 through correspondence. Each course costs \$40 and students can enrol at any time.

Since there are no classes to attend, ILC courses offer students the flexibility to study anywhere, any time, and at their own pace. Course work can be submitted for evaluation by mail or via the internet.

In addition to credit courses, the ILC offers four non-credit courses for adults who want to improve their skills. These are

Adult Basic Literacy, English as a Second Language, Adult Basic English and Adult Basic Mathematics.

Services to support students include:

- The Ask a Teacher online chat for free homework help from certified Ontario teachers five days a week.
- Homework help from ILC teachers. Ask questions by fax, email or voice mail.
- Use an e-journal to submit course work over the internet for evaluation. Teachers mark the assignments and send them back via the internet with a mark.
- The high school equivalency—General Educational Development (GED) testing program allows people 18 or older who have not finished high school to demonstrate they have acquired the knowledge and skills associated with, and comparable to, high school completion.

As adults acquire knowledge, skills and concepts through working, training, travelling, reading and other informal learning, this high school equivalency test measures the level of ‘educational maturity’ gained through experience, which is often equal to or more than that of a high school graduate. Successful GED candidates earn the Ontario High School Equivalency Certificate, which is accepted as meeting secondary school requirements for the purposes of:

- employment
- promotion within an organisation
- admission to an educational or training institution.

The CareerMatters component of the website has two additional features, which although are Canadian in nature could offer a useful resource when looking at career paths. In the Careers section there are

- 500 detailed job descriptions including specific duties, education or training requirements, career path, and links to related associations for more information
- Over 150 video job profiles.

In the apprenticeship section there are forty day-in-the-life photo essay profiles and videos of real apprentices.

The website *www.ilc.org* is a free website and offers a range of free support services which can be used by students and teachers.

### **The AlphaPlus resource centre**

AlphaPlus, as a provincial literacy resource centre, is taking the lead in the area of e-learning in Ontario with AlphaRoute and other innovative web-based literacy supports.

AlphaRoute is an online learning environment managed by the AlphaPlus Centre in Toronto in partnership with provincial funders The Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities

and nationally by the National Literacy Secretariat of Human Resources and Development in Canada.

AlphaRoute began as an initiative to explore if it was possible to develop and deliver literacy learning content online, and to then determine if adult literacy learners could access the site and whether they would enjoy learning online. A goal of AlphaRoute has been to provide adult literacy learners with an environment where they can increase their transferable technical skills, and to provide a virtual learning environment that learners can access anywhere, anytime.

There are four AlphaRoute learning sites, one for each of the Deaf, Native, Francophone and Anglophone literacy communities. Each site has followed its own development path, and although there are standard common features such as learning activities, interactive tools, learner portfolios, learning support features, online newspapers and a personalised list of activities, there is a range in the amount of content on each site. There are five levels of difficulty presented in the activities (based on Ontario Learning Outcomes for Literacy). These levels range from beginning reading, writing and numeracy to the equivalent of grade 12 in the formal academic system (very similar to the CGEA outcomes).

AlphaRoute provides learning activities and environments that do not prescribe a complete curriculum for learners but can, when blended with other learning resources—such as educational software, educational websites, print-based, audio and other technology like TV and video (and enriched by online communication tools built into AlphaRoute like email, live chat and asynchronous discussion forums)—provide a place for adult learners to explore, and with practitioner support define a learning path to match their goals and learning styles.

### **Outcomes from the recent Canadian ABS survey**

With the release of new figures in the past four months from the Canadian ABS survey, it has been reported that there is likely to be a huge downturn in support from the Canadian government to support LBS programs. After the results of the previous ABS survey and the poor literacy rates of its population, the government placed enormous amounts of money into the education system to support basic skills development. For whatever the reasons, this has not replicated itself into the dramatic increases governments wanted to see when the next survey results came in.

Sadly, this means that some of the great programs that I was able to see may not continue to be funded in the same capacities. At a practitioner level these are the difficulties we all face, no matter where we live. We see the benefits of increased

government support and funding opportunities, but they often do not transfer in the ways they need to for continued support from funding bodies.

In May 2006 Debbie Soccio travelled to Canada to attend and present two papers at the Canadian Association of Distance Education (CADE) International Conference in Quebec. Following this conference she visited some colleges and

government-funded ALBE sites in Toronto. Debbie would like to extend a special thank-you to Victoria University for supporting her trip.

Debbie Soccio has worked in the adult literacy field for 16 years, and has a particular interest in developing blended learning programs for students who choose to study flexibly.

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# Beside the Whiteboard

**'Pleased to meet you, and oh by the way, you are taking the next two classes and the first one starts in five minutes'. That was Sam Jackson's first day at the school. On the second, he took part in a 400-metre sprint—comfortably dressed in long pants, shirt and tie.**

## Background

For 12 years before my final resignation in October 2006, I worked for the Access Education and Training Department at the Centre for Adult Education (CAE) in Melbourne. To say that I enjoyed every moment of my time there would be a lie, but it would not be a resounding lie and despite the odd tear and minor frustrations I enjoyed my working life.

Over the years, as a teacher of maths, computer science and study skills I became increasingly committed to the notion that the most important area of education was in basic education, and that the most important skills we could give our students were the ability to communicate effectively in the written and spoken language, and to develop at least rudimentary number skills. This may sound perilously close to the 3Rs of a prior age, but I believe that they knew a thing or two then because the consequences of the failure to impart those skills or acquire them are obvious.

It has been both my experience and conviction that if you teach someone to read well they will usually have a love of books and a desire to know things just for the sheer pleasure it can give. They will read more widely or in greater depth according to what captures their interest for the rest of their lives—a lifelong learning experience. A large part of my own skill as a teacher is in finding different ways to get these messages across. Being imaginative and inventive in doing it is the essence of our craft. I must confess here a bias against introducing exotic subjects to a curriculum at the expense of these basic survival skills.

## Retirement

It started impinging on my consciousness a year or two ago. I was reading about some famous person who'd died 'of an AIDS-related disease', and the goblin who inhabits some part of my cranium said 'Yes, and you're dying of an age-related disease'. And so it came to me that I should squeeze as much out of the active years that I had left before age, sickness or apathy barred me from their enjoyment. I didn't want to grow old in the suburbs. Only now at 60 am I finally aware of mortality and the startling brevity of existence. I'm also mindful of Bette Davis's unforgettable line 'Old age is no place for wimps', and all that that portends. My message for the future was clear: today is more important than tomorrow.

So in 2006 I finally made my move and retired to Thailand. I can't say I've actually planned my retirement, but I have

worried about it for a long time and that must count for something. I suppose to me it's held the same mysteries as motherhood and relationships—I've never understood exactly how you went about it. I knew that you were meant to have saved enough money, and I patently hadn't done that. The investment managers and advisors were quoting a bare minimum of half a million dollars to retire on and it left me wondering why I was the only person in Australia who hadn't got it. I was half the blanket short or to be mathematically precise, three fifths of the blanket short. It somehow felt like I'd let everyone down by not providing adequately for the event (or is it a process?).

I had been trying for some years to draw up a plan, or rather to get someone to do it for me. My target was a good friend who lived in London and who would meet me every couple of years to walk in India or Nepal. My friend was an accountant and a director of a merchant bank. I'd tried to get him to do a plan for me previously but he'd always avoided it. Now, trapped in a miserable trekking hotel in Nepal with rain sluicing down outside, he finally relented. 'OK', he said, 'What are your assets?' I listed them, giving a faithful disclosure of the bounty accrued from a lifetime of effort. 'And ...' he said rather pointedly after I'd reached the last item on my list. 'And what?' I replied. 'Is this all you've managed to get from a lifetime of work?' Rather peeved, I said, 'Well, I am a teacher. The gravy train you're on didn't stop at my station. Part of our income is considered to be the satisfaction we get from helping others get on to the train you're on'. He eyed me somewhat pityingly, I fancied, then delivered the last rites. 'Well', he said, 'it's simple really, you can't retire. The only way you can beat the system is to die early'. Alas, at 60 I'm too old to die early. As another person rather cruelly told me: 'You don't have to worry about your future anymore. *Your* future's all used up'. Ah! The consolations of having friends! Where this all leaves me is not easy to say.

## Back to work

It was not my first attempt at retirement however. I had resigned two years previously with the intention of retiring but I soon realised that my funds were totally inadequate. I knew then that I would be either doing a shuttle between Australia and Thailand for some years to come to eke out my funds, or I could work part- or full-time in Thailand. I didn't look around for work, but a good friend who was working at Chiang Mai university had a request from the head

of the English Department at a state school 20 kilometres from Chiang Mai to find them a conversational English teacher. I took the opportunity because I wanted to be part of something and not just a spectator in my new life. They asked me to go for an interview in which qualifications were never mentioned; the recommendation of my friend was sufficient. After all, he was or had been a lecturer in the university of Chiang Mai's masters program in English. No panel, no questions, just 'pleased to meet you, and oh by the way you are taking the next two classes and the first one starts in five minutes'. My panel was going to be there after all—my friend plus the head of the English department and the classroom teacher.

It went without too many glitches and the students turned out to be a revelation. They greeted you when you arrived and thanked you when you left, were willing to participate in classroom activities and loved competitive games. I made it a habit to incorporate as many games as I could into the lessons, especially in the afternoons when the classrooms were hot and airless.

That first day was a Thursday and after I'd successfully negotiated my two classes I was asked to attend the following day for the annual school sports day. What an affair. I had thought that it was a voluntary addition to my duties. Perhaps I'd slip in unnoticed for an hour and say hello to a few members of staff. Maybe I'd even meet the principal if he or she could spare the time. Then I'd slip away quietly to start my weekend early.

When I arrived at the school office it became obvious that this was not quite the casual affair I'd thought it was going to be. There was an elevated marquee for dignitaries. I was late and everyone knew it. The local police captain was there. The principal vacated his seat to let me sit between him and the police chief.

The second race after I arrived was the male staff 400m, and I was asked to participate in shirt, long pants and tie. All I could think was that I shouldn't worry about humiliation, just survive it. We set off at a cracking pace and after 200 metres my muscles turned to water and I slowed down. Funny thing was, so did everyone else. It dawned on me that the pack was trying to ensure that I wouldn't lose face by falling too far to the rear. By dint of feigned pulled muscles and stopping off for various refreshments along the way they conspired to make me finish fourth. It would have been third but even the 20-something teacher at my shoulder realised that he had to finish before my snail pace if the audience wasn't to smell a rat. National honours were vindicated and I learned an important lesson—face is a big consideration to Thais and they will do anything to avoid losing it or causing others to lose it.

Monday came around, and on the school parade ground assembled 1040 students plus around 70 staff. The flag was raised and the national song sung. Then came the exhortations to better performance and conduct. After about 20 minutes the head of English took the rostrum and the microphone, which was the point at which I started to be concerned. Naturally she spoke in Thai, but then came my name and the proffering of the microphone to say a few words. I'm sure that 99 per cent of my audience had absolutely no idea what I said, but seeing all those faces and being asked to address them was comforting rather than daunting. They were pleased to have me and I liked them.



The first couple of weeks were arduous. Since I was the only native English teacher at the school, I said I'd take every class so that every student would get one conversation class per week. By the end of the second week I was exhausted, and a more realistic regime was set in place. I started to do mornings one week and afternoons the next. The students ranged from 11 years to 18 and classes were from 30 to 45 students.

There was little in the way of management problems, and even the students that the class teachers told me to look out for were by western standards easy to deal with. I never at any time experienced a class disruption. Students who lost interest or found it difficult to cope might withdraw, but the main body were generally obedient, self-disciplined and anxious to learn. I soon became known and students would greet me with 'good morning Ajarn Sam', *Ajarn* being the Thai word for professor—quite an undeserved elevation in my status.

My Thai improved rapidly, though the tones were and are a continual bugbear. The language has 44 consonants and 26 vowels, so that sounds that are distinct to Thais are indistinguishable to anglophone ears. The students would howl with laughter at some of my efforts. Occasionally, I would exact a malicious revenge by getting students to

say words like 'squirrel' or anything with more than two consonants stuck together like 'sprint' or 'construct'. Like Chinese speakers, Thais also have difficulty with end consonants. But the students were good teachers and I think I learnt as much Thai as they learnt English, a fair exchange.

The Thais grade or stream their classes and this sometimes led to unexpected groupings. For instance Class 6A (the top stream in the final year of the school) was exclusively girls. Not one boy! At the other end the fifth stream 6E was predominantly boys. The boys would ask me to join their soccer games at lunchtime, while the girls would invite me to sit at their table to improve their conversation.

We had some funny moments. I took one class and did 'opposite words', making it into a game. The students in this case were divided into boys versus girls, a division I usually avoided. The game was going badly for the boys and the girls were leading by seven to one. To stop the boys losing interest I said, 'The next one is worth five points. What is the opposite of "forget"?' A boy got his hand up first and called out excitedly, 'November, November!'

We also played team games where the students were divided into teams and then instructed on various actions, which would be demonstrated to them 'Stand on one leg, turn around, cover your eyes, touch your elbow, kick it'. I'd no sooner finished demonstrating an imaginary football being

kicked when one of the schools large dogs came and sat at my feet. The call went up in unison, 'Kick it, Kick it!'

I spent three happy months at the high school, but now I restrict my English teaching to two hours a week giving free English classes in the local village hall. The CELTA course I did in 2003 has helped me and I'd advise anyone without an English teaching background to consider it. If you get a job on agency you might also find that a Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training is required.

I'm happy here on my half acre surrounded by rice paddies and coconut palms. The house I designed in a Bangkok hotel four years ago is my home, and despite the snakes, scorpions, centipedes and spiders, I'm here to stay and so are my three dogs.

I'd like to call the only black one Madame but unfortunately, he's a boy.

**Sam Jackson was for many years a teacher of maths, IT and study skills in the Adult and Community Education field. In 2006, Sam retired and moved to Thailand—to the house he designed in the country near Chiang Mai.**

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special projects such as this. In the last two years the TCFUA has tracked about 2000 factory retrenchments in Victoria alone.

### **Postscript to this project**

In November 2006, Godfrey Hirst took over Feltex and immediately attempted to introduce AWAs to replace the existing EBA. The TCFUA fought this and won, preserving the workers' retrenchment entitlements as well as other conditions in their ongoing EBA for a further two years. In February 2007, 110 workers were given notice of retrenchment from the old Feltex sites in Tottenham and Brooklyn, around the corner from the old Feltex yarns mill in Braybrook. Godfrey Hirst did not agree to provide a post-retrenchment support program for these workers. The majority of those who are about to leave Feltex are people over the age of 40, from a non-English-speaking background, who have been there for an average of 15 years. They have not yet thought about what they will do next.

**Maree Keating is currently a researcher, teacher and project officer with the TCFUA. Her main focus is on helping retrenched TCF workers' access post-retrenchment support. Maree is enrolled in a PhD on the topic.**

### **Note**

The book is available from the TCFUA at \$10 per copy or \$100 for a set of ten. Contact Maree Keating on [mkeating@tcfvic.org.au](mailto:mkeating@tcfvic.org.au) or 0439 567 554 to order a set for your classroom.

### **Note on the photographs**

Photographs by Angela Bailey