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features

Fancy footwork: what does it say to you?

by Delia Bradshaw

When a group of women educators began sharing their stories of life and work in the world of adult education, the result was a book called *Fancy Footwork*.

3

There's a blind dog in my classroom...

by Margaret Kelly

Creating a safe and productive learning environment for a vision-impaired student with a guide dog.

7

Working towards strength-based adult education

by Crina Virgona and Peter Waterhouse

Strength-based practice aims at empowering clients in therapy, and it could be equally effective in adult learning.

11

regulars

Practical Matters

CGEA workshops at the VALBEC evening forum brought much enlightenment, according to Lisa Bartels and Pauline Morrow; and Sharon Templeman looks at a new post-graduate qualification for literacy and numeracy teachers in VET.

17

Technology Matters

What can you learn in Second Life? Virtually anything, says Glenda McPherson.

22

Open Forum

Lynne Fitzpatrick and Liz Davidson tell us more about implementing the new CGEA.

27

What's Out There

Sarah Deasey reviews *Literacy Face to Face*, a resource for volunteer tutors and their trainers.

28

Policy Update

Michelle Circelli details the latest NCVER research into adult literacy and numeracy training, and Lynne Matheson reports on last May's 'Living Literacies' VALBEC conference.

30

Foreign Correspondence

Workshops and networking, and—being Ireland—the correct application of poetry, made a success of the annual Research and Practice in Adult Literacy conference in Belfast.

34

Beside the Whiteboard

Lynn Matheson draws on a 1997 interview with Nick Oliver before hitting 'Fast Forward' to get a current update on his career in teaching computer literacy.

35

Editorial

Ah, Spring! It is so encouraging to see the bright and cheery colours of daffodils, hyacinths and irises appearing in the garden, signalling the start of a new season and new growth. So it is with this spring edition of *Fine Print*. There is a veritable cornucopia of articles to challenge us into trying some new ideas within virtual worlds and to inform us of changes to come with the ever-increasing reality of the new CGEA implementation.

In a feature article, 'Fancy footwork', Delia Bradshaw shares the journey of the Women of Spirit explorers who came together to talk and write and read of their experiences in the world of adult education. This was a journey culminating in their book *Fancy Footwork*, launched at the VALBEC conference in May 2007. Margaret Kelly in 'There's a blind dog in my classroom...' provides some really helpful information and suggestions on how to provide a safe and productive learning environment for a vision-impaired student and the accompanying guide dog. The third feature article outlines 'Strength-based practice', a type of intervention that gives the client control over his or her particular situation. This is a therapy used by welfare workers, and Crina Virgona and Peter Waterhouse introduce the concept as an exciting opportunity to expand our thinking by linking it to adult learning principles.

In Practical Matters Glenda McPherson takes us into the virtual world Second Life (on a private island, no less!), sharing the success of a collaborative learning experiment outside the traditional classroom environment. Turning to the new curriculum, the practitioner-led workshops at the VALBEC evening forum are reported on by Lisa Bartels and Pauline Morrow. Also in this section, Sharon Templeman from Swinburne University of Technology explains the development, structure and subjects of a new postgraduate course for literacy and numeracy teachers. The Graduate

Certificate of Social Science (Literacy and Numeracy Teaching in VET) commences in February 2008.

In Open Forum, 'Implementing the new CGEA' by Lynne Fitzpatrick and Liz Davidson summarises the advice given by the ACFE-funded implementation guide, outlines some FAQs, and shows where to find this on the web. With the demise of ARIS, *Fine Print* has stepped in with What's Out There to continue occasional reviews of current teaching resources and references. In this edition, Sarah Deasey reviews 'Literacy Face to Face', a resource for volunteer tutors and teachers delivering tutor training courses.

In Policy Update, Michelle Circelli gives details of five new National Centre for Vocational and Educational Research (NCVER) research reports on projects focusing on various aspects of literacy and numeracy training. Lynne Matheson provides a comprehensive report on the successful Living Literacies conference in May 2007. A general overview of participants is included. For Foreign Correspondence we cross to the Northern Hemisphere with Beverley Campbell's report on the annual Research and Practice in Adult Literacy conference in Belfast in June 2007. Here we gain some interesting insights in the theoretical and pedagogical issues faced by adult learners and educators in the UK. Beside the Whiteboard goes back to a 1997 interview with Nick Oliver in a 'where are they now' scenario. Fast forward to 2007 and there is an update on his current career and reflections on the past.

Certainly a good read to enjoy outside midst the blooming flowers!

Gail Pratley

Gail Pratley teaches in the youth unit at Swinburne TAFE, and is a member of the VALBEC committee.

The Victorian Adult Literacy and Basic Education Council (VALBEC) aims to lead the adult literacy field through identifying issues of importance to practitioners and facilitating positive change. This is achieved through networking, professional support, the sharing of information and the promotion of best practice.

Fancy Footwork: what does it say to you?

by Delia Bradshaw

They were the Women of Spirit, and they met to share their love of education and literacy and lifelong learning. And when the talking turned to writing, the writing became an intriguing book called Fancy Footwork.

Women of Spirit

I love listening to teachers. I love hearing them talk about their work. I welcome any opportunity to do so. So, imagine my delight when an opportunity came that enabled me to do this regularly and often. It happened two years ago when a group of eight women adult educators decided to do just this. From our beginning in April 2005, we chose to embark on a journey together for the explicit purpose of sharing histories and reflections on the world and work of adult education.

Who made up this group of explorers? How often did we meet? Seven of us—Jacinta Agostinelli, Clara Brack, Beverley Campbell, Helena Spyrou, Jules de Cinque, Lynne Matheson, Liz Suda and I—met every six weeks throughout 2005, 2006 and 2007, so far. Though our focus was adult education in general, we had all been adult literacy teachers in a wide range of community, TAFE and university and workplace settings, and some still are. Allie Clemons, a contributor of ideas from the beginning, joined us towards the end.

We called ourselves Women of Spirit, a name that embraced aspects of women's spiritedness—courage, passion, compassion, contemplation and inspiring leadership—that we all admired.

The group

Let me tell you some of the story of this group and its formation. To start, I'll quote Beverley's account, written nine months into the life of the group:

Women of Spirit began as a disparate and tentative collection of women early in 2005. We met for the first time at Delia's home, in response to an invitation from Delia to come and bring something we might talk about which represented an aspect of our adult education experience, important to us. Mostly I had encountered these women professionally at public adult education events and now here we were meeting in the tranquillity and comfort of Delia's home. Drawn together initially by a shared passion for adult education, after nine months of meeting we have become a group. Now we are bound together by shared values about what adult education might be, and a commitment to making these values explicit ... we not only meet to talk about what we value in adult education but we agreed early in the life of the group that we would write a piece for each meeting as well (p.11–12).

The writing

So, as Beverley says, we met to converse but we also came together to write and read each other's work. Clara, another member of the group, continues the story:

Early on, we decided to write responses to a common question arising from discussions in the meeting. The writing would provide continuity and focus for discussion at the next meeting. We decided not to read other's writing before writing our own piece, so as not to be influenced. We would keep discussion for the meeting. Often what comes up in the writing does not respond directly to what emerged in the discussion. Given that the next session is six weeks away, and that most of us write about five weeks after the initial question is proposed for discussion, the responses to the question draw from what is happening at the time (p.14–15).

The book

From early on, there was the idea of a publication. However, we did not write with a book to the fore of our thoughts; to the contrary, publication plans were very vague and in no way determined our written and oral reflections. Quite deliberately, we wrote for each other, prompted by priorities of the moment. Over the weeks, during 2006 and for most of 2007, our focus was on a wide range of educational issues that were urgent or pressing for us right there and then.

Yet, whilst we had no deadline or publisher in mind, we were nonetheless conscious of the importance of documenting some of the rich traditions of adult education in Victoria. As well, as teacher educators, we were acutely aware of the scarcity of publications available that foregrounded Australian women's voices and women's perspectives. So when in late 2006, thanks to Allie's initiative, support from the Professional Learning Research Group in the Faculty of Education, Monash University made a book possible, we enthusiastically put our minds to organising our writing from the previous eighteen months. And so, in this serendipitous way, our Women of Spirit writing culminated in the publication of a book, one that came to be called *Fancy Footwork*. I'll say more about the publication later. For now, I'd like to concentrate on the writing. Let us hear the voices and views of the women adult educator-writers themselves. Let us sample their writing and 'fancy footwork' first-hand.

The voices, the views

To give a taste of the diversity of views and tone of voice in *Fancy Footwork*, I have arranged a selection of quotes under educational threads that weave themselves in and out of all the writing.

Role of the teacher

The role of the teacher was discussed vigorously in our conversations and appears often as a topic in the book. Here is what Jacinta has to say:

I do not overestimate my power as a teacher. Change is ever only small. It is incremental and comes from many sources. If I look at my own life, it is the confluence of many people and events and my perceptions of these that have influenced change within me. What I teach and what students learn together create change, but not of an earth shattering kind. Change comes in shades, and on a day-to-day scale it is imperceptible. We adapt to change and may not even notice it happening. The person I see when I look in the mirror is the same person I saw twenty years ago; the only difference is that I have realised the potential that was waiting in the future. For the students I teach, my teaching is just a component of their self-realisation (p.112).

Purposes of education

The purposes of education also received a lot of attention in our Women of Spirit meetings. As with the role of the teacher, our group represented a wide range of views on this topic. In *Fancy Footwork*, Liz puts it this way:

I guess I tend to veer towards the political because I am concerned that a content neutral approach to adult literacy means that we are not educating for life as active citizens—informed consumers and voters. I wonder if we share the same political perspectives even in our small group of 'spirited' women who seek to educate. Freire (1972) argued that all education is political. Is that a negotiable concept? (p.182)

I investigate this topic from the point of view of online learning:

... In many circles, online learning has a reputation for being conservative, instrumental, apolitical and narcissistic. Ulises Mejias is a man who seems to position himself firmly in the educational tradition dedicated to liberation that we were discussing at our last meeting. In my experience, this is a rare find in e-circles. It is why, having read his article, I made a point of hearing Ulises speak at the online launch of his article in *The Knowledge Tree: An e-Journal of Learning Innovation*.

The two points Ulises makes that I particularly like are:

- The online world is not something second best or unreal or lightweight. More and more, it is a world to be taken very seriously.
- However, whatever 'enlightenment' or 'empowerment' or 'transformation' (all my words, not Ulises') occurs online is gravely limited and suspect if it is not transported and translated into action offline.

I agree with both his points (p.122–123).

As evident from above, closely related to the 'why' (or purposes) of education are the 'when' and 'where' (or times and spaces). Jules evokes this intimate connection when she writes:

Spirituality is about connecting with time and place. That is, our land and the living things upon it, past, present and future. This interconnectedness creates passion for social justice, peace and harmony. And from spirituality is born art, as a means of expressing and experiencing spirituality.

When I work with young people I strive to impart more than content. In fact the content is merely the vehicle for accreditation and accreditation is just the means of negotiation through the system. There are more important aspects to education.

Many of the young people I work with are sad and in pain. I often think of them as difficult, hormonal teenagers with the life experience of an 80-year-old and the emotional needs of an infant. As their teacher, I want to begin the healing process. I try to facilitate a constructive connection with others. I try to create a safe learning environment where they can be calm in the present, learn from the past and be hopeful about the future (p.42).

Professional identity

Questions about the purposes of education inevitably lead to questions of professional identity—who we are and how we have been shaped. This is named explicitly by the editors in their collective introduction to *Fancy Footwork*:

... The writing in this collection points to the need to reframe notions of professionalism which are traditionally associated with what is public. Too often, the private and personal stay in the shadows, unacknowledged and undervalued. The professional identities and actions of adult educators, these women say, rely on the dissolution of private and public spaces. Here, readers will find that educational professionalism depends in fact on insights, reflections, influences and values drawn from all aspects of life. There are no rigid boundaries between the public and private, personal, political and professional. The spaces

do, and must, blend productively to become the inspiration for professional judgment and robust professional action (p.27).

Lifelong learning

As demonstrated by the passage above exploring professional identity, all of us as writers are aware of the interplay between formal learning and informal learning. As Lynne reflects on this, she concludes:

The lived experience of a new concept or skill, as mind and body absorb and enact, are the markers of our educational journey. As we continue daily learning new things and reaching higher levels of understanding, the often random intake of information or else the enforced study to broaden our knowledge base, all contribute in one way or another to the bigger sense of individual lifelong learning (p.169).

The production

As anyone who has published a book will know, there are many stages between the decision to publish and the arrival of the book from the printer's. On behalf of the group, the editors, Beverley, Allie and myself (Delia), assembled all the writing, organised it into sections, named the sections, wrote section introductions, did some light editing and at the very end of this process, co-wrote the introduction to the book. We deemed it important to provide a 'meta' view of the writings to both honour the sophistication of the writing and to set it in an academic context.

The table of contents that we editors designed is organised in six sections. The headings for the sections highlight the questions and issues that had preoccupied our group over time. They are:

- Teaching with spirit
- Professional identity: weaving public, private and political
- Learning spaces
- Transformation in the spotlight
- The art of pedagogy in action
- Bodies and/of knowledge.

Taken as a whole, these headings summarise the key themes that grew out of our six-weekly cycle, during 2005 and most of 2006—a regular rhythm of conversing, reflecting, writing, reading and conversing once again.

At the same time as the editors were preparing the text, Helena was working on the design of the book and the cover. We were delighted that Julie Parsons, a Perth artist, gave us permission to reproduce her arresting image for the cover and that Helena, one of our group and familiar with its particular culture, had volunteered to do the complex and arduous work of desktop publishing.

The name of the book

As all parents know, naming is a powerful act. We considered many alternatives before finally choosing the name *Fancy Footwork*: adult educators thinking on their feet. The reason for this title is partly explained in the introduction:

On the one hand, 'fancy' is often characterised as private, genteel, domesticating, artistic, elitist, and sedate. We confine the fancy to an essentially reproductive, leisure activity and see it dependent on good hands and a good eye. At its most extreme, this view reduces 'fancy work' to an inessential and bourgeois luxury.

'Work', on the other hand, can easily be presented as public, robust, liberating, practical and democratic—a vigorous and productive activity requiring a strong mind and body. 'Work' is perceived as the place where the 'real thing' happens. Not only does 'foot' in *Fancy Footwork* act as a bridge between 'fancy' and 'work', it also reveals ways in which both 'fancy' and 'work' can emerge as cooperative contributors rather than as hostile, competing opposites.

By positioning 'foot' at the centre point, as in *Fancy Footwork*, this new alignment moves our attention to matters such as nimbleness, split-second timing, precise judgments, pacing and spacing. All of these are sophisticated capacities drawing on the whole body, the whole self, including heart, mind and spirit. It becomes clear that 'fancy footwork' requires being mindful of what has just happened, is happening now and what could/should happen next. As displayed by teachers in this book, the versatility of 'fancy footwork' means that past, present and future coexist in every moment (pp.24–25).

The launch

Fancy Footwork was launched by Helen Macrae on the May 4 at the VALBEC 2007 conference. Whilst Helen named nine distinctive features about the book, I will draw attention here to five that struck her as important. I'd like to quote from her speech at length and in particular the connections she makes between our book and VALBEC:

This is a Victorian book about adult education. It's published by VALBEC. It's wholly written, edited and designed by Victorians. The only non-Victorian contribution is the splendid artwork on the cover by Julie Parsons from Western Australia. Now Victoria is a state where adult education is done very well indeed, I believe it's done better here than anywhere else in Australia. If there was a Nobel Prize for adult education, this state would surely deserve to be on the worldwide short list. So, you get a strong feeling of place from *Fancy Footwork*.

This book is written and produced by women. We also only have to look around the room to know that adult education

is a sector with a steady 1:9 ratio of men to women, yet male voices have dominated published discourse about adult education in Australia. So, who better to talk to us about adult education than women who are well known for their high calibre as thinkers, teachers, friends and co-workers?

This is a book full of new thinking about issues that are really tough to articulate. Well, if you're like me you'll be surprised and delighted by this book because it goes into places I'd never even think to go to by myself, and likely you wouldn't either.

This book asks questions. As any good pedagogical text would, it answers some and others it leaves hanging in the air. This book is infused with the culture and values of VALBEC. Since it began, VALBEC has been an organisation where equals sit at one another's feet and learn. VALBEC creates the space for practitioners to learn from each other. That's what this group of women did. They came together and learnt from one another. They moved easily all the time between teacher and learner. And at the start of the book several of them give an account of how that happened.

Warmest thanks are due to VALBEC who agreed to be our publisher. This generosity gave us access to publicity, payment options, distribution and a welcome and vital online presence.

Significance for me

As initiator, I am often asked what this project, this community of practice, means and has meant to me. Though I cannot (and do not) speak for the group, I would like to identify some of the ways in which this collective process and its fruits have enriched my life, both personally and professionally, if it's even possible to separate parts of my life in this way. I will highlight four aspects in particular.

1. Harmonious coexistence of roles

On those Saturday afternoons when Women of Spirit met as a group at Beverley's or my place, we were conscious of the many parts of our lives that came together in our conversations. For example, we were simultaneously adult learners and adult educators, consciously living the values and ethos we advocate for healthy and democratic adult learning environments; that is, the sharing of power and life experiences. Each person took responsibility for the life of the group and no artificial boundaries existed between private and public lives. I loved this living out of holistic learning.

2. Rich mix of modes

There was such pleasure in the convivial conversations and gripping story telling, a multi-modal fusion of narrative and reflection, dialogue and analysis, in speech and in writing.

I see it as blended learning with a new face. The speaking and listening, the reading and writing, the constructing and deconstructing, electronically and in person—all these strands were knitted into a complex and integrated fabric of social, cultural and political commentary on adult education. We continually came back to the same topics, knowing our multi-generic thinking was always a work in progress.

3. Slow learning

Both the multiplicity of roles and the diversity of modes made for deep and wide learning. This wealth is well encapsulated in an exciting new concept that came my way a few months ago: the concept of slow learning, a notion that allies itself with the more familiar concepts of slow food and slow design. I first came across it in an article/podcast by Geetha Narayanan in the online journal, *The Knowledge Tree*, published earlier this year. The name Geetha gives her article reveals her ideals: 'A dangerous but powerful idea: Counter acceleration and speed with slowness and wholeness'.

Describing her work (Project Vision) in India, Geetha says:

The need seemed to be to re-envision and to design a new system, one that supports both personal and social transformation and creates 21st Century learning.

Project Vision addressed these fundamental inequities by shifting the notion of a school from a fixed place to a set of spaces that exist and operate simultaneously within and without the community. It does this in a way where flows of knowledge and understanding are created at and through many levels—physical, emotional, cognitive and psychological—in ways that interact, making the end transformative.

What slowness has allowed us to do is find the time to work on the mind and the body as one whole and not as two distinct and separate parts. Slowness has allowed us to focus not just on learning but on unlearning. Wholeness has allowed for us to be mindful and contemplative.

But in order to generate value, they (the new digital technologies) need to be integrated into new forms and structures in an invisible and contextual manner so that *they work slowly and with great finesse to create an unquiet and critical pedagogy* (my italics)—one (that) can sustain social change.

What Geetha says about the new digital technologies applies to the transformative power of our group where change was gradual and, given the six-weekly rhythm of our interactions, there was ample time for new insights and ways of being to be absorbed. I relished this gentle pace.

Continued on page 21 ...

There's a blind dog in my classroom...

by Margaret Kelly

... but as everyone discovered in Ann Marie's class at the Council of Adult Education (formerly Centre for Adult Education), it's the owner who's blind, not the dog. And that's not all the class learned when Ann Marie returned with Queena after a month of training with Guide Dogs Victoria.

The preparation for the return to class of Ann Marie and Queena had been happening for a while. Staff members were emailed the news, there was discussion about the impact in the classroom and decisions were made as to who would keep the water bowl filled. Before leaving for training, Ann Marie talked to the class about what was happening and when she returned she gave a presentation about Guide dog etiquette. This is what the class learned:

- Guide dogs can accompany their owners everywhere, except to the zoo and the operating theatre.
- Guide dogs are trained to sit quietly close to their owner and tuck themselves away under a table or chair. They will not approach other people in the class.
- A Guide dog in harness is working. Never pat a Guide dog in harness, or call its name, or try to attract its attention. Distracting it will put its handler at risk.
- When off harness, the dog is trained to sit and relax. With the owner's permission you can talk to it or pat it, but let it sit quietly.
- Never feed a Guide dog. Only their owner feeds them and they are on a controlled diet, so you could put their health at risk.

Ann Marie has severe vision impairment, and adapting to having a dog in the classroom was just one of the adjustments that CAE staff made to accommodate Ann Marie's learning needs. Ann Marie says that the following information was very helpful:

- Provision of a laptop computer for use in the classroom, with a large flat screen monitor and screen magnification.
- Provision of mimio equipment, allowing her to read what the teacher writes on the whiteboard on her computer screen.
- Teachers reading aloud as they write on the whiteboard.
- Teachers describing what is happening in the room.
- Materials provided either in electronic format to be read on the computer, or as enlarged photocopies.
- Assistance from other students, by including her in their activities and ensuring she could participate when they gave presentations, was particularly appreciated.

Ann Marie says that her greatest difficulty was trying to work from printed material. She found this very stressful, as she could not keep up with the class.

As an adult literacy teacher working with students who have vision impairments, I am sometimes involved in placement of

students in Certificate of General Education programs. When a student enrolls it is often a surprise to the teacher, who may have no experience of teaching a student with a vision impairment and may have not even considered the possibility. They are probably already teaching a class of students with very diverse needs and having a student with yet another 'difference' can seem all too much. However, usually they find that there are more similarities than differences and it becomes part of their skill set. In most cases it is a positive experience for everyone.

These days most education for students with vision impairments takes place in an integrated setting, and this includes adult literacy and basic education programs. While in the past, basic education took place in separate institutions, the expectation now is that people with vision impairments will participate in the services in their local community just like everyone else. Additional funding is available to support students with disabilities in education, particularly in TAFE programs. A disability-specific education system could not possibly replicate the diversity of opportunities made available by TAFE and community education providers.

Specific skills

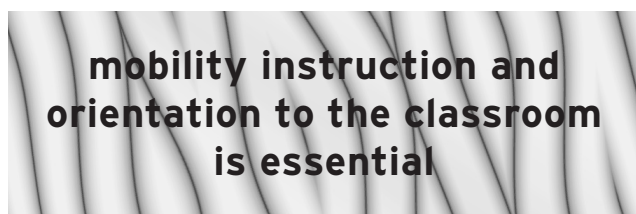
The only alternative education systems that exist for people with vision impairments teach skills that are specific to people with vision impairments, such as alternative ways of accessing computers. At Vision Australia there is a small adult literacy program, but it is a transitional program aimed at teaching basic skills that equip a student to go into a mainstream classroom.

CAE is one of the organisations that has worked successfully with students with vision impairments. Although CAE is an organisation with limited funding, they have turned this into a positive by providing, wherever possible, resources such as adaptive technology that support the students' independent learning. Vivienne Bennett, equity and access officer at CAE, says her role is 'to provide positive and constructive support' to both student and staff at the time of placement and as the student progresses through the course. She explained the process she goes through when a student with vision impairment approaches her for assistance.

The first step is to gather information about the student's goals and learning needs, primarily from the student but also from

support services if the student wants to involve them. She then talks to the course coordinator and teachers in the subject area and the appropriate course is identified.

Once a choice about the course is made, she goes through the curriculum with staff week-by-week to look at what will need to be adapted. She also looks at the individual teaching strategies of the staff members involved. With this information, she identifies the resources the student will need to participate in the class. This can include course materials in alternative formats such as large print or braille, and a laptop computer with adaptive technology such as screen-reading software, a large screen monitor, trackball mouse and Mimio technology to display the notes on the board on the computer screen. Sometimes a support worker will be required, but Vivienne emphasises that their role is to support the student to participate, not do the work for the student. If a support worker is to be used, they will be briefed and introduced to the student and teacher.



In this process teachers are briefed as early as possible by giving them written materials outlining the student's needs and by talking to the teacher. Vivienne goes through the curriculum with the teacher, highlighting anything that may be of particular difficulty, such as exercises that are entirely visual or excursions to an inaccessible venue. Vivienne works with the teacher to provide solutions, either by adapting materials or coming up with an equivalent alternative. To provide classroom materials in accessible formats Vivienne needs to identify the materials that need to be transcribed into alternate formats, and give the staff time frames to get the originals to her for transcription.

For students with vision impairment, mobility instruction and orientation to the classroom is essential. Part of this is for the students themselves to learn to get around the building, but it also involves briefing staff and other students and making them aware of things that can create hazards, such as chairs left out from the desk or a door which is usually closed being left open. Strategies also have to be developed to make sure the student is notified of room changes or cancellations.

Positive placements

Vivienne believes that it is essential to make every placement as positive an experience as possible for everyone, and that in most cases that is what happens. She says positive placements lead to staff who are willing to take other students, leading to more positive experiences and more students. A successful

placement depends on the lateral thinking abilities of all parties; she gives an example of a deaf-blind student who, as part of her class, had to view and respond to a movie. Vivienne was able to acquire a copy of the film script so the student could read it in braille, and an interpreter was used to describe part of the film. Through this combination, the student could experience the film and carry out the task.

Vivienne says that some difficulties do occur. The greatest difficulties are involved in converting materials to alternate formats, as staff often are not familiar with what is involved and the time she needs to do it. The most crucial part of a successful placement is getting learning materials to the student in the right format on time, and this takes a lot of organisation and effort from everyone concerned.

She says also staff can find it hard to understand a student's individual vision condition, often overestimating the amount of sight a student has. No two vision conditions are alike, and students can often manage very independently in one situation but not in another, depending on their individual vision functioning.

Vivienne says that CAE provides pathways of continuing education from the Certificate of General Education for Adults programs through to VCE, VCAL and VET courses, and numbers of students who started in the CGEA programs are now in tertiary education and employment. She also highlights the importance of participation beyond educational outcomes in increasing a student's independence in the community, leading to increased opportunities both in life and employment. In the end, she says, everyone gains from the experience of integration—the student, the teacher increasing their skill set, and the other students.

Vision impairment

Most people with a vision impairment have some vision. Vision is a very complex sense, so when people have a vision impairment, no two are alike and the solutions for each person are individual. What works for one student will not work for another. One person may have a wide field of vision but cannot see detail at all, another may have a tiny field of vision but be able to read small print, another may have floating 'blobs' in their field of vision which change day to day, another may be very sensitive to glare, another may have constant eye movements making reading visually impossible even though they may have a lot of functional vision. Making text bigger may work for one person, but for another it just makes it into a bigger blur. It is essential to understand what the student is actually able to see.

Vision fatigue

When a person is struggling to focus on text they are not able to read easily, and it causes vision fatigue. This happens to

everybody, as anyone who has ever left their reading glasses at home will know. This is no different for a person with a severe vision impairment; it is something they struggle with every day. Vision fatigue is an overwhelming sense of exhaustion, and once a student has become fatigued they are not able to learn. Therefore, it is essential for any student that they have their learning materials in the optimum format, and even more true for students who are learning to read and write.

Reading and writing in alternate formats

People with vision impairments have a number of choices of reading and writing tools including braille, large print, electronic text-to-speech software, electronic screen magnification software and high-contrast texts. Many people will use different tools for different situations.

Braille is the preferred format for many students. It is a tactile reading system with an alphabet that directly corresponds to the visual alphabet, although literary braille uses shorthand forms to compress the text, making reading more fluent. Braille provides the closest equivalent to visual reading; recent studies of brain activity demonstrate that braille readers activate the visual cortex when reading. The standard for large print is an 18-point font (eighteen-point font) and sans serif fonts are easier to read.

Braille is not an option for everyone, and for people who cannot access print, text-to-speech software provides a reading tool. This is an electronic voice that reads the content of the computer screen. Teachers often question if this is really reading, and the answer is definitely yes. Using text-to-speech software is a complex skill in itself, and while it may make one component of reading—word recognition—easier, the other components are up to the reader, and in fact reading comprehension can be more difficult as the reader has to hold all the relevant information in their head.

Inclusive teaching practices

Renee Williamson, tertiary education consultant at Vision Australia, says that many of the things that assist students with vision impairments will assist other student in the classroom. For instance, seeing and hearing information at the same time assists many students, so reading out the notes as you write them on the whiteboard will assist everyone in the classroom.

Renee makes the following suggestions:

- All learning materials used by the class must be available in the preferred format of the student.
- Read notes out as you write them.
- Describe diagrams verbally.
- Use students' names when you address them rather than indicate them.

- Describe a position in words rather than indicate it: 'over there' is not helpful.
- Talk to the student about their vision condition and what will be helpful to them; for example, one student may see better at the front, another may prefer to be at the back and another may be very sensitive to glare. Every vision condition is different.
- Talk to the student about adapting tasks.

Social aspects of the classroom

Renee makes the following suggestions to help a student with a vision impairment feel comfortable in the classroom:

- Discuss how the student wants to handle the classroom situation with the student; do not discuss their disability with other students without their permission.
- The teachers should announce themselves when they come into the room so the student knows they are there.
- A roll call is a natural way for the student to get to know people's names and voices, and where they are in the room.
- When asking students to work in groups, pick the groups yourself rather than expect the student to find one for themselves. Finding your own group can be daunting when you cannot see the other students.
- With the student's permission, other students can be asked to assist with things such as remembering to push in chairs or keeping bags under desks.

Differences in reading and writing for people with vision impairments

- In most cases they see less of the text when they are reading. Even a fluent braille reader only sees the words they are immediately reading. Someone reading with magnification only sees a few words at a time or sometimes only a few letters. This means that their memory has to work harder when reading and writing.
- They get little reinforcement for reading and spelling skills from print in the environment. Fully-sighted people see print around them from birth, and children start recognising interesting words like McDonalds very early on.
- They do not always get immediate feedback when they are writing. When you learn to write with pen and paper, there is an immediate connection between how you form the letters and the shapes of the letters when you read them. If you write in braille or with a keyboard, there is no immediate tactile relationship between writing and the shapes of letters. It is therefore important that this direct experience of the shape of text is supplied in other ways.
- Text processing is slower: reading braille, magnified print or audio will always be slower than reading standard print. This means that a student may take longer to complete the same amount of work, and allowances have to be made for this when setting work and assessing it.

Choosing reading tools

There are many different ways that people with vision impairments can access and produce text, and selecting the optimum reading and writing format is a complicated decision; many factors have to be taken into account. Additionally, most people with vision impairments will use different reading and writing tools in different situations; for instance, a person may use an electronic screenreader 'voice' to read documents at work, braille to read books at home, and a big black texta pen to write reminder notes. In *Towards excellence: effective education for students with vision impairments* (Gillian Gale, Pat Kelley, 1998) the authors suggest taking the following into account:

- learning style and rate
- visual efficiency and potential
- tactual efficiency and potential
- prognosis of the vision impairment
- presence of additional handicaps
- reading rate and comprehension with current medium
- portability
- ability to both read and write using medium
- access to information in preferred mode.

Some ways of accessing text are:

- large print
- print with a hand-held magnifier
- magnified print on a computer screen
- standard or magnified print on a computer screen supported by text-to-speech
- print with a video magnifier
- braille
- computer with refreshable braille display
- text-to-speech screen reading software
- recorded speech
- human reader.

Some ways of producing text are:

- standard pen and paper
- black line paper
- black line paper and high contrast black pen
- very large print with black texta
- pen and paper under a video magnifier
- keyboard with standard computer
- keyboard with magnification software
- keyboard with magnification software and text-to-speech
- keyboards with text-to-speech software
- Perkins braille
- electronic braille
- braille hand frame and stylus
- notebook computer with braille keyboard
- recorded speech
- scribe.

It is therefore very important to consult the student about what method or methods work best for them. At the same

time, if they seem to be really struggling—for instance, a student writing with a standard pen with their eye almost on the page—it may be worth reviewing the method they are using, as there are many choices.

Spelling and grammar

Spelling and grammar are the two aspects of written language that seem to cause the most difficulty for students with vision impairments. This is probably because they see less of the text at any one time. Visual readers intuitively absorb the rules of spelling and grammar, and can often use them correctly, just knowing that it 'looks right' that way. Readers with vision impairments need more explicit teaching of the rules of written language. Additionally, if a student has a specific auditory learning difficulty they are not able to compensate by using their vision, so the effect of the learning difficulty is magnified.

Spelling can particularly be a major hurdle. Most methods of teaching spelling in recent years rely on the student memorising whole words. These methods rely on visual memory, and are not effective for students who are not seeing whole words. Traditional methods such as Look Cover Check don't work for obvious reasons.

Structured phonic teaching helps students retain spelling patterns. Learning to spell the phonemes, the building blocks of written language, makes it easier to remember spelling; for instance, instead of having to remember the 11 letters in 'recognition' you remember four regular phonic 'chunks': 're' / 'cog' / 'ni' / 'tion'.

Phonic methods that have been used successfully in the class at Vision Australia are the *Spelling made easy* series and *Remedial spelling* by Violet Brand, and (same name, different publication, Ed.) *Spelling made easy* by Barbara Dykes and Constance Thomas. These systems systematically teach spelling patterns and the rules of spelling. Once the pattern is learnt, effective reinforcement is provided through exercises where the student hears the word and writes it—such as dictation exercises—or has to think of the word and write it, such as Cloze exercises. These methods will also help other students in the class who have difficulty retaining spelling patterns.

If a student does not have an intuitive sense of formal sentence construction and punctuation, they will need to be taught the elements of a sentence through formal grammar exercises. Another useful resource is *Grammar made easy* by Barbara Dykes.

Dictionaries

Although large print dictionaries are available, they are very expensive and still quite difficult for many students to access. Electronic dictionaries on the computer are easier to look up

Continued on page 29 ...

Working towards strength-based adult education

by Crina Virgona and Peter Waterhouse

Based on principles of social justice, and with values that match those of Adult Learning Principles, strength-based practice is an approach where the teacher works within the learners' cultural context rather than the learners having to fit into the offerings of the centre. The learners decide their goals and discuss how they will get there, as well as examining issues of identity—who they are, who they want to be, and the consequence of change upon themselves and their community.

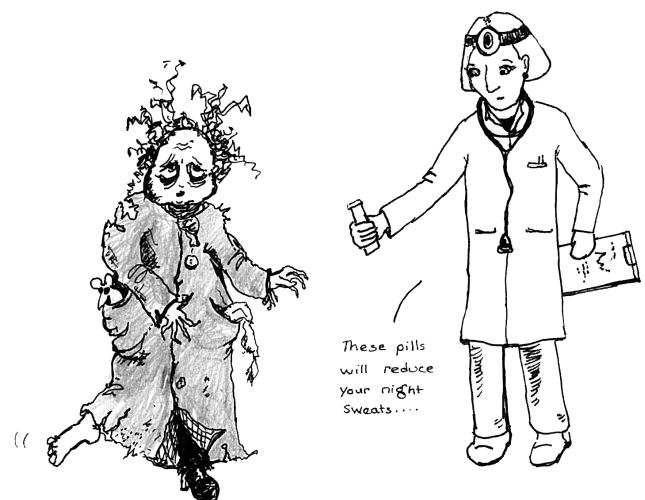
Our recent work in the literacy patch has led us in two directions: firstly to smell the flowers, appreciating the terrific achievements of ACE providers (Sanguinetti et al 2004), and secondly to follow the seeds that have blown outside the patch—those people who have not got what they wanted from adult literacy provision. Let's think about the latter for the moment. We completed a study in 2005 called *Contradicting the Stereotype*, where we profiled ten people who had been successful in life and work despite their limited literacy. Some of these people had achieved independence in their literacy through the assistance of adult literacy provision, but others gave up on the literacy front and sought solutions elsewhere. We questioned why this happened, and whether it should have.

Wherever we spoke publicly about this project, audience members came up to us afterwards to tell us about their brother, daughter, husband, friend, who had abandoned the literacy battle and found other ways to overcome the print hurdles in their lives. It seems there are abundant numbers out there who are often managing pretty well, but at the same time harbouring a deep secret and, for many, a great alienation—their lack of literacy. It seems common knowledge, in some quarters, that 'dyslexics' are disproportionately represented in the wealthiest people in the world (Tulip Financial Group 2003). So maybe it doesn't matter that they are managing on their own. But we wondered whether the structures in which we operate were closing off possibilities for some of these people.

Shifting away from the medical model

In our research, we came across some interesting work that has formed the basis of the welfare industry's approach to client relationships. Anyone working in the health industry will have come across person-centred care. This is an approach to working with people which is based on individual needs, capacities and world views. It challenges the medical model, which identifies symptoms, diagnoses a condition and treats the condition.

The rejection of the medical model has become something of a zeitgeist, a generally accepted stance. Educators have

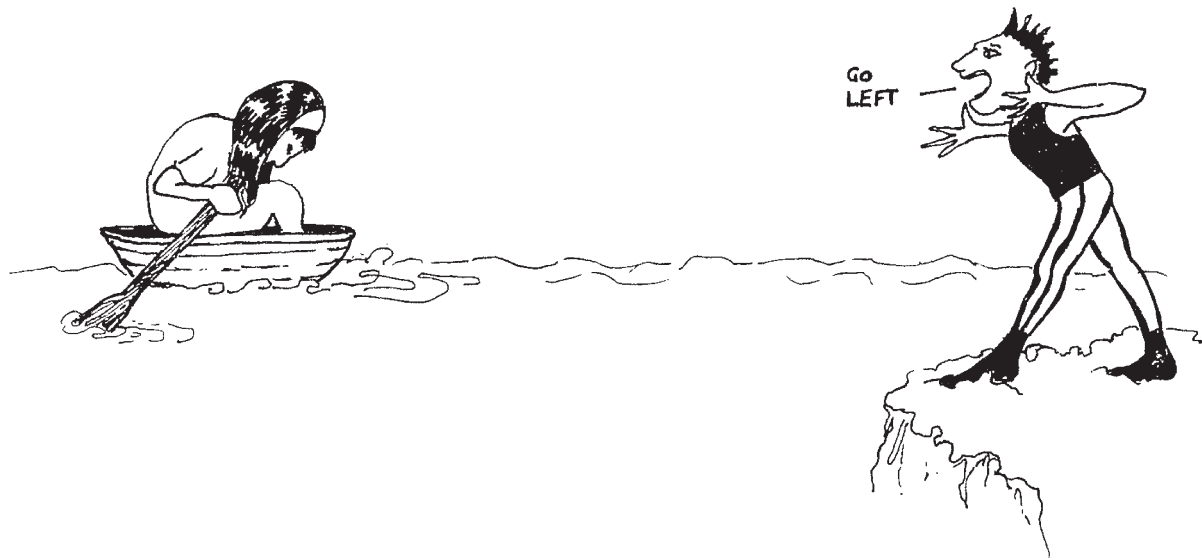


also responded to these cultural influences, and we too have a strong emphasis on the individual. But the welfare sector has taken it somewhat further and has gathered a group of therapies to inform and refine their practice. The best known is perhaps Narrative Therapy, which centres on the identity through which an individual lives out his/her life: How do they identify themselves? As a rebel, a failure, a clever strategist, an unrecognised genius? What story do they tell about themselves? Working with their story, the therapist encourages the client to examine it and consider whether this is who they really want to be.

Strength-Based Practice (SBP) is a hybrid therapy. It is closely related to other therapies such as Solution-Focused Therapy and Brief Therapy. We lighted upon Strength-Based Practice not only because its values matched those of Adult Learning Principles but also because it has a clearly articulated set of techniques that are very portable to different environments.

What is Strength-Based Practice?

Strength-Based Practice is a type of intervention used by welfare workers that leaves the client in control of their trajectory. SBP shows a way for the practitioner to enter the world of the client and stand alongside them while they make the decisions about their future, their relationships and the solutions to the problems they are facing. It respects the fact



that the client knows best what will work for them. Clients will only strive for goals they own. It is quite the opposite of the medical model, where the professional is seen to be the expert and the best judge of what should happen and how.

SBP is founded on principles of social justice. Practitioners are acutely aware of the sins of cultural colonisation that have preceded them. They accept the diverse ways one might choose to live in the world and the range of solutions that might work for individuals faced with a problem. Practitioners work from an orientation that states:

- people want to change
- the solution is already there (though not always immediately visible)
- the focus is the future and the present rather than the past
- the professional-client relationship is very important
- the practitioner shifts the client's thinking and language from problems to solutions
- there are times when the problem is not there, and these times can be retrieved and extended to become the way the client usually functions
- insight and knowledge of the problem is not necessary—the focus is on solutions.

(adapted from Osborn, n.d.)

Conversations between practitioners and clients enact this approach. Practitioners question the clients so that they examine their story, inviting them to reframe it and so to identify their strengths and resources. Armed with an understanding of their strengths, they design a solution to their difficulties one step at a time. Clients are both designers and monitors of their trajectory towards the goals they have selected.

The skills of practitioners are in their questioning and their application of the techniques, but these are rooted in a

committed conviction to the principles of social justice and faith in the individual's capacity to take command of their life and solve their own problems.

So what for adult education?

You may well be thinking that adult educators already subscribe to these values. After all there are volumes of evidence to demonstrate the proficiency of educators as experts in relating to students. The flowers in the literacy patch testify to this. We are all vehemently opposed to deficit models in education and we all adhere to adult learning principles.

Yes, this is true—or is it? It is a long time since most of us visited the Adult Learning Principles and considered how they are currently being applied. Over several years now, our professional development energy seems to be absorbed by accountability systems of assessment and audit requirements, and in the meantime the thinking in interactional proficiency has moved on. In our staff rooms we emphasise the importance of the individual, but we work to prescriptive curriculum standards and assessment outcomes. And while we abhor deficit models, the measures by which we assess and classify students are usually deficit-based. We classify and assess according to what learners can and can't do on a scale set by externally determined benchmarks.

In our research travels we came across an American educator, Chip Anderson, who talks about his conversion from a deficit base to a strength base (Anderson 2005). Anderson worked with 'failing' university students. He saw his job as plugging the holes in their proficiency, so he tested his students to identify their deficiencies. However he changed his approach when he discovered that students failed due to loss of interest and disillusionment, rather than lack of ability or knowledge. In fact his deficit approach was contributing to their poor

motivation. Hence he changed tack and began working with colleagues and students on identifying and reinforcing latent strengths. There is one edition of the online journal *Educational Horizons* devoted to issues in Strength-Based Education (Pi Lambda Theta 2005).

Our experience provoked us to ask: are we more deficit-oriented than we think we are? What would our provision look like if we geared our practice to nurturing students' strengths matched on their selected goals? How much control do students have in deciding what they will learn and how they will learn it? How much authority do they have in monitoring and assessing their achievements? What opportunities do we make for assisting students to achieve their personal goals? There is very little space in current programs to acknowledge outcomes that learners may set for themselves, such as increased ability to participate in their child's school community or to manage their own finances or have sufficient confidence to reach for more ambitious goals.

Teacher–student interaction

We undertook a small research study where we simulated intake interviews with potential literacy learners for an adult learning centre. We did the simulated interviews at a number of sites with teachers and an actor taking on different characters. The characters were drawn from our Contradicting the Stereotype profiles. Our simulation was a first time meeting between teacher and potential students.

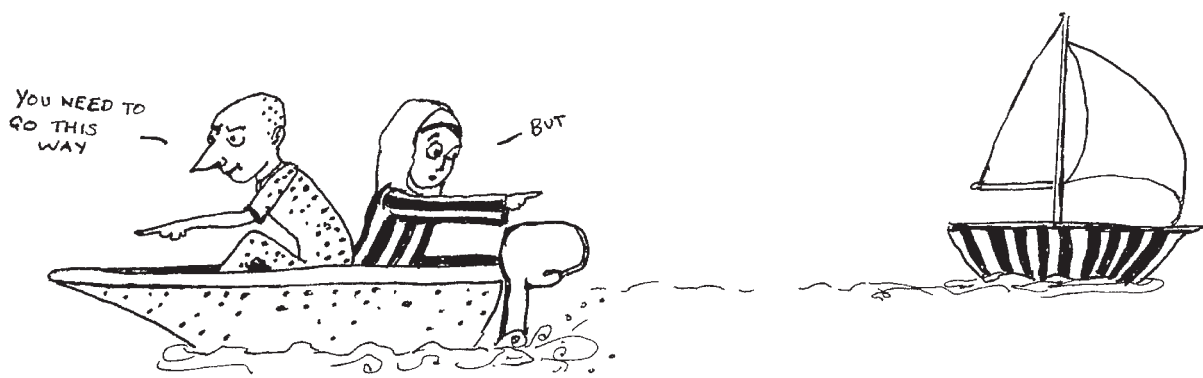
Generally speaking, teachers envisaged their task as collecting basic information from the interviewees in order to classify them, fit them into existing programs and provide the data to meet the auditing and funding requirements. Teachers were usually quick to truncate interviewee's stories, but saw the priority as explaining the offering and operations of the centre. This is probably standard practice. However, its consequence is that teachers are unable or unwilling to engage in the aspirations, anxieties or learning beliefs the individuals brought with them. Our analysis suggested that if this were the reality, learners would not get what they

needed from the centre and would look elsewhere outside the education system.

On discussing this further with the educators, it was clear that they put their trust in building relationships in the classroom. Our evidence suggests that most experienced adult educators are really good at this. So is that the end of the story, and is the problem only attributable to the constraints of the intake interview? Do we have anything to learn from Strength-Based Practice?

Our experience tells us that there are many who fall outside the adult literacy net—disaffected youth, those who see themselves too old to learn and those who feel they can't learn using traditional methods. Furthermore, if conference designers and best practice nominators have anything to do with it, many regular adult educators seem to still have a lot to learn. Programs that get the conference accolades usually take a strength-based approach, though they may not be named in this way. ACAL and state-based literacy forums have often called upon speakers from Indigenous literacy programs to showcase their programs (Brown 2005, McRae 2006, Somerville 2007).

These programs demonstrate an approach where the teacher works within the cultural context of the learners, rather than the more usual circumstance where learners fit into the offerings of the centre. The learners decide their goals and together they discuss how they will get there. They discuss questions of identity, who they are, who they want to be, and the consequence of change upon themselves and their community. Sharon Brown has given us an excellent example of this (ibid 2005). The 'Make it Real' CD outlines a similar set of programs that have resulted in commercial enterprises led by Indigenous groups. The teachers are there to facilitate and support the outcomes that the groups are seeking. They mentor the skills development and the shift in identity for the group participants. Successes often exceed expectation and accredited outcomes emerge, but they do not overshadow or foreshadow the goals of the group.



While we sing in praise of these exciting programs and do our darnedest to emulate them, there are no maps to show us how to get there. There is no guidance about the conversations we need to have with our learners. How do we set up a strength-based relationship and program? This is where Strength-Based Practice can help because it outlines a number of techniques to guide us. While the setting is that of counselling and one-to-one interactions and some distance from the environment in which we work, the techniques are basically transferable. Actualising that link is the work of educators, but much of the groundwork has been done by Mahlberg and Sjoblom (2004) who applied Strength-Based Education in a primary schooling environment. We have yet to be offered the detail within an adult setting. The foundation, however, is in understanding the techniques

used by practitioners in the counselling realm. See tables 1 and 2.

This description is a summary of more expansive detail available in the resource document to become available through the National Centre for Vocational and Educational Research later in the year.

Conclusion

This is only a beginning. There is a lot more work to be done in understanding the potential and practice of strength-based education. Further work needs to be done in understanding the operational activity of the examples already available in adult education. We need to experiment with applying the techniques described above to group interaction in an

Table 1

Share the client's world view

Practitioners begin by trying to see the world through the client's eyes—observing their body language and listening for their adjectives and metaphors:

eg What's this black hole you mentioned?

The practitioner attempts to name what is happening for the client. Along the way the client may come to recognising and acknowledging their feelings

eg: You said you were angry but you smiled when you said that. What does that mean?

Positive reflective listening

Reflective listening is common practice within human relationships work. Strength-Based practitioners put a positive spin on their reflection.

eg: You said it was a real struggle getting through your course but you did it. You overcame the hurdles that your literacy put in front of you.

Seek out and naming the client's strengths

Once the practitioner has a good understanding of the client's experience, he/she may move on to exploring the client's strengths. Again sensitive observation and questioning are the key resources for the practitioner.

eg: You said you had an awful time at school but you still kept turning up every day. How did you manage that?

Clarify the vision

The client is seeking change in their life. What is it? What would change look like? Make the vision concrete. (The miracle question below will help.)

Understanding the strength

Investigating the identified strengths, the practitioner may work with clients to explore how their strengths have played out in their life before. What is their source? How have they helped them overcome difficulties? What relevance could they have for their present situation? How could they be strengthened?

eg. You talk about not being so timid and trying new things when you were in England. It sounds as if you found you had new abilities despite your limited literacy. Could these help you find a solution to your employment problem?

Build the resources

Using a strengths perspective, the practitioner probes for the resources the client can draw upon to assist them in the changes they seek. The resources may be people, beliefs or networks.

eg: Your football experience has taught you a lot about keeping up your morale, and your friends at the football club may have some useful contacts.

Seeking solutions

Strength-Based practitioners resist the temptation to offer solutions. They are careful not to nudge the steering wheel from the client. Developing the client's independence and a conviction that they can manage their own lives is a fundamental premise of this approach. Work with the client to identify the next small but achievable step.

eg: What can you do in the next week to make progress?

Monitoring progress

Strength-based practitioners train the client to notice the first signs of change so they can build on them. It may be only small, like overcoming a barrier for a while, or taking a risk in doing something new even if the outcome was disappointing. Nonetheless these are the beginnings of new thinking and possibilities that need to be nurtured.

eg: So you had a go at talking to the boss. It must have been hard to actually start that conversation, even if it didn't get the result you wanted. What gave you the strength to do that?

Table 2

Strength-Based practice tools

There are certain techniques that Strength-Based Practitioners have in their kitbags. They are standard tools used in their practice.

The scale

This is one of the conversational devices that give shape to the magnitude of the client's feelings and motivations. It also helps practitioners to get inside the head of their client. Practitioners may use the scale when asking about the client's sense of despair, or optimism, or feelings of achievement, or rate of progress, or anything that assists clients to better understand themselves.

eg: How important is it for you to learn to read and write? On a 10 point scale, if one means it doesn't matter that much and 10 means it is one of the most important things in your life, where would you stand?

When rating progress the practitioner may ask the client 'What would it take to move up a point?' This question will reveal the next step, being always mindful of the client's need to control their own destiny.

At the end of the consultation, the client usually goes away with a plan of what they will do to create change in their circumstances. The agency for change is not handed over to the practitioner. It is the responsibility of the client.

The miracle question

Another technique is what is called the 'miracle question'.

eg: If you woke up tomorrow morning and found the problem had gone away completely, how would your life be different?

This technique assists the client to envisage another world and stand in a different space. The practitioner works with the client to probe the vision. What would look different? What would people say to you? What changes would they notice? How does it feel? What is it like in a problem-free space?

The exception question

The exception question directs the client's attention to the times, past and present, when they didn't have the problem that preoccupies them. The practitioner probes how this situation came about and how they contributed to its success. What strengths and resources were working for them on that occasion? How can they reapply those skills and strengths? By exploring these times, the client finds that they have within themselves the capacity to overcome the problem.

Arts-based approaches

Strength-Based Practice is a heavily 'language'd therapy. Clients need to find words to explain their experience. Many clients, however, are not articulate or reflective. To assist, practitioners often use arts-based approaches. This may involve drawing, role-play and images.

These are tools to make experience accessible and to provoke metaphors that describe experience, visions of the future or feelings. Metaphors are reference points that contain the riches of a discussion. While the tools may assist, the advice to practitioners is that the best metaphors are those that the clients, or learners, create themselves.

The practitioner will then question the client to understand what they have produced.

eg: You have drawn this person very large. Can you tell me why?

It seems we are looking down on this scene. Is that significant?

You've chosen this picture which is very dark. Did you think about that when you chose it?

In Australia, St Luke's Innovative Resources publishes cards with pictures, questions, words and ideas for stimulating this type of discussion. They also have staff development resources such as Name the Frame cards to assist communities and workplace groups in socially just decision making. The cards probe the principles at work in framing the power dynamics, the focus issues, the barriers to full participation and the unwritten rules of inclusion and exclusion.

Embedded conversational tools

There are a number of techniques or tools that are not particular to Strength-Based practice but go with the package of client respect and positive regard. There are just three mentioned here, but the list could go on.

Offering choice

This is important if we want to establish greater equity in our relationships. The choice may be seemingly trivial such as 'where would you like to sit?' or something more significant such as 'do you want to tell me about that?' or 'are you happy to continue or would you prefer to finish this later?'

Establishing this level of consultation right from the beginning is empowering, and ameliorates the sense that something is going to happen to them and they must submit. It can change the dynamics of what is to follow.

Normalising

Normalising is a common conversation practice that attempts to counteract the Robinson Crusoe syndrome. It feeds back to people that they are not freaks. Others have been there before and found the way out of their difficulty. Adult Basic Education teachers know the curative power of this, and observe that in most classes it happens automatically.

eg. (after a hesitant attempt at navigating): Lots of us have trouble reading maps. It is quite a specialist task and most people are not trained for its.

Avoiding platitudinous responses

It is often difficult to avoid the 'Oh no, no' response when someone comes up with the old chestnut 'I'm too old to learn' or 'I just can't make progress with this stuff', or 'I really don't want to do a literacy test'.

The stock responses to these statements are not real, such as 'You're never too old to learn', 'You're doing fine' or 'Don't worry, it's nothing'. On hearing this, the person feels they are not being heard or taken seriously.

A skilled response is one that hears the genuine anxiety and frustration that underlies the comment, and applies all the above techniques to explore it. A reality check may well be part of it, particularly at the point of positive reflection and identifying strengths.



educational environment. This approach promises an exciting new world for adult educators, and for many of us it is time for a new way of conceiving our work that expands the boundaries and transfers greater power to the learners in the system.

Crina Virgona and Peter Waterhouse are two of the founding members of Workplace Learning Initiatives (WLI). WLI is committed to research, professional development and the promotion of creative and inclusive methods of vocational education. Crina and Peter have collaborated in most of WLI's research and have PhDs in workplace literacy education.

All cartoons in this article by Lulu Wilson.

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Practical matters

During the VALBEC evening forum in May, as Lisa Bartels and Pauline Morrow report, the collaborative nature of practitioner-led CGEA workshops ensured maximum benefits for participants and presenters. And, Sharon Templeman details Swinburne University of Technology's new Graduate Certificate of Social Science, which commences next February.

CGEA implementation: a VALBEC evening forum

by Lisa Bartels and Pauline Morrow

In May 2007, the annual VALBEC pre-conference forum was held at the Footscray Nicholson campus of Victoria University. The forum focused on the implementation of the newly accredited Certificates in General Education for Adults and offered participants the opportunity to participate in two of four practitioner-led workshops. Broadly, these workshops dealt with issues of reading the document, planning and implementing a course, and identifying resources to support the delivery of the new curriculum. Practitioner/presenters were drawn from both small and large providers and included teachers and course coordinators. The workshops aimed to address the needs and interests of small community providers and large providers.

As presenters, both of us have many years of experience both in teaching and coordinating the CGEA within a TAFE setting. The content of the workshop reflected our own areas of interest and a desire to explore the factors that would influence our planning for course delivery in 2008. Neither of us had begun to use the reaccredited curriculum, although we had both actively followed the reaccreditation process and had participated in a number of forums within our own organisations and at a regional level. We had also attended the professional development for implementation provided by the curriculum maintenance managers (CMM), and we drew upon their model and resources to structure our session. Underpinning the workshop were the questions that we and our colleagues had been asking with regard to the new document and its impact on our planning and teaching in the future. We chose to address these questions by structuring the workshop around three key areas:

1. The structure of the new curriculum: comparison of the old and the new.
2. Unpacking a unit from the reaccredited curriculum document.
3. Planning a course for a large provider.

The session was well attended by approximately 30 participants. We believe the high interest level was indicative

of the general interest of teachers in the changes to their curriculum, but also of the anxieties of those who were embarking on the planning process for the substantially changed curriculum document. Participants had come from regional and metropolitan areas, and a small number of interstate practitioners were also in attendance. The presence of representatives from both small and larger providers added to the variety and expertise present within the group, and ultimately to the richness of the discussions that took place. While the majority of practitioners were very familiar with the old curriculum, only a few had begun implementing the new certificate.

In order to focus on the structure of the reaccredited document, we provided an overview of the fundamental changes to the course at each level, the introduction of the initial level of the curriculum, and the removal of the General Curriculum Option. We also discussed the changes to the language of the document, implications for assessment, and the underpinning theories and research that had provided the basis for the changes present in the new format. Through this process, participants who were less familiar with the reaccredited CGEA were able to clarify areas of confusion and to gain a 'big picture' understanding of the document that they would be working with in the future. More experienced practitioners, some of whom had been involved in the reaccreditation process, contributed a wealth of knowledge to the discussion and were able to address questions on the basis of their comprehensive understanding of the old and the new curriculum documents.

In the second section of the workshop, a unit was taken from the current curriculum document and one from the reaccredited document and participants worked through a parallel reading activity. Through this process, we aimed to find equivalent levels of information and content where they existed and to interpret the functions of sections that were new to the curriculum. This was an especially productive phase of the workshop, and a large amount of ground was covered in coming to grips with the detail of the unit. The participants found it useful to look at the same units at the higher and

Practical matters

lower levels in order to provide a context of the continuum of skills development, and to examine and interpret the language used to describe these skills through the elements and performance criteria. Through the ensuing discussion, a number of points of clarification were raised, specifically to do with the interpretation of language and the requirements for assessment, which the group decided to send through to the staff of the CMM for clarification. The CMM have since agreed to include these questions in the Frequently Asked Questions section in the implementation guide.

At the conclusion of this phase of the workshop, all participants seemed to have developed a more comprehensive understanding of the detail contained within the unit examined. It was a dynamic process and an exciting experience to have the opportunity to work with such a diverse and experienced range of teachers at such a thorough and detailed level.

We discussed the issues and constraints that are present within our organisations when we are planning our courses, and the way that the reaccredited curriculum might impact upon these. The discussion focused on issues of funding, timetabling and staffing, accommodating staff expertise, and most importantly catering for the needs, interests and goals of our students within the new structure of the curriculum. The stronger emphasis on the use of electives—and particularly the importing of training package (TP) modules—received particular attention, and the way in which a course could be customised to meet the needs of specific cohorts was at the core of this stage of the workshop. Questions were raised about the level of qualification required to deliver a training package module, and the assessment requirements for establishing that a student is competent in a TP module. The group examined Sections A and B of the curriculum document to address these questions.

Finally, we looked at various models of courses, both real and hypothetical, for working with specific groups of students. The models presented catered for a group of students focused on further study, and a group enrolled in a unit from the Horticulture Training Package. The opportunity to see how the course would fit together within the new structure was of great value, and the tools developed for course mapping at this level will be valuable for our future planning. See table 1.

We would like to congratulate VALBEC for the use of this model of professional development delivery. The practitioner-led workshops, through their collaborative approach, enabled participants and presenters to have a voice, to influence the focus of the workshop and the ground covered in group discussion, and most importantly to share expertise and knowledge with a broad range of colleagues. As practitioner/

Table 1: Sample CGEA Certificate 1. (Developed by and currently delivered at Melbourne CAE.)

<i>Core units</i>			
VBQU130	120103	Develop and document a learning plan and portfolio	10
VBQU131	120199	Plan and undertake a project	30
<i>Core skills—Reading</i>			
VBQU132	120103	Engage with texts of limited complexity for personal purposes	20
VBQU133	120103	Engage with texts of limited complexity for learning purposes	20
VBQU135	120103	Engage with texts of limited complexity to participate in the community	20
<i>Core skills—Writing</i>			
VBQU136	120103	Create texts of limited complexity for personal purposes	20
VBQU137	120103	Create texts of limited complexity for learning purposes	20
VBQU138	120103	Create texts of limited complexity to participate in the community	20
<i>Core skills—Numeracy and Mathematics</i>			
VBQU139	120103	Work with time, money and directions in familiar situations	60
VBQU140	120103	Work with measurement and design in familiar situations	60
<i>Special interest electives</i>			
FPPCOM1A		Use basic workplace communication	30
VBQM483	120103	Australian history	30
VBQM475		Local orientation	20
VBP509		Computers for learning	25
Total nominal hours			385

With thanks to Dianne Parslow and CAE

presenters we were, as we often are, impressed and encouraged by the determination and commitment of the teachers in attendance and inspired by the input of participants. We know the experience will be of benefit to us in maximising our capacity to address the needs of our students through the implementation of the reaccredited CGEA.

Lisa Bartels coordinates adult literacy programs at Victoria University's Footscray Nicholson Street campus, and teaches reading, writing and oral communication CGEA 2 and 3. Pauline Morrow coordinates the Adult Literacy and Basic Education programs at Kangan Batman TAFE in Broadmeadows, and also teaches CGEA 1 and CGEA 3.

Practical matters

A post-graduate qualification for literacy and numeracy teachers in VET

by Sharon Templeman

Literacy and numeracy teachers daily walk the line between the philosophy of 'Skilled for life! Enhancing the lives of the people we serve',¹ and in the VET context, the demands of outcomes-based curricula, competency-based assessment, Training Packages, quality systems and the needs of funding organisations and partners.

They are skilled in the culture and practices of both worlds, interpreting each to the other and ensuring that their students' experiences are enriched by both perspectives.

However, there has recently been a dearth of qualifications that recognise and deepen these skills. Swinburne University of Technology, TAFE division, is pleased to announce a new course, the Graduate Certificate of Social Science (Literacy and Numeracy Teaching in VET). The first intake for the course will be in February 2008.

The course will comprise four subjects, of which three are core and one will be chosen from a list of electives. The three core subjects are:

1. Adult Literacy Theory and Practice in the VET learning environment. The subject will include, but is not restricted to:
 - English language and literacy teaching theories and methodologies:
 - Definitions and interpretations of adult literacy including literacy as a social and cultural phenomenon.
 - Adult literacy theories and methodologies including psycholinguistics, socio-functional linguistics, critical literacy and discourse analysis.
 - Research into literacy practices including in the workplace.
 - Applied linguistics in terms of text analysis and knowledge of a range of Englishes including standard Australian English, non-standard English, creoles and code switching.
 - Theories and methodologies of adult and applied learning.
 - Issues and strategies related to teaching disparate learner groups, including: adult, youth, CALD, indigenous.
 - Course design that reflects understanding of grammars, including traditional and socio-functional linguistics, phonology and lexis.
 - Preparing teaching and learning resources, including e-resources, that meet the needs of learners and reflect a sound theoretical base.

- Familiarity with common curriculum and Training Package courses.
 - Effective delivery in a range of VET teaching/learning environments, including workplace, with a developing understanding of current drivers.
2. Adult numeracy theory and practice in the VET learning environment. The subject will include, but is not restricted to:
 - Numeracy and mathematics teaching theories and methodologies:
 - What is numeracy?
 - Numeracy and mathematics theories and methodologies, including constructivism, social constructivism, ethnomathematics.
 - Research into numeracy practices, including in the workplace.
 - Numeracy as applied mathematics: practical and embedded in contexts.
 - Theories and methodologies of adult and applied learning.
 - Issues related to the teaching and learning of numeracy and mathematics including maths anxiety, gender and working with disparate learner groups, including adult, youth, CALD, indigenous: identification and strategies.
 - Course design.
 - Preparing teaching and learning resources, including e-resources, that meet the needs of learners and reflect a sound theoretical base.
 - Familiarity with common curriculum and Training Package courses.
 - Effective delivery in a range of VET teaching/learning environments, including workplace.
 - Development of understanding of factors active in the current VET environment.
 3. Applying literacy and numeracy teaching skills: supervised teaching practice.

The focus of the unit is on successful completion of a supervised practicum. In order to support the practicum, students will undertake theoretical studies and be provided with opportunities for discussion and reflection on their practice.

In terms of career progression and salary entitlements, it will be of interest to teachers that the supervised practicum is designed to meet the requirements of the Victorian Multi-

Practical matters

Employer Certified Agreement, (MECA), established in April 2005, for an AQF Level 5 teaching qualification.

4. The fourth subject may be chosen, subject to demand, from:
- Assess adult literacy and numeracy competence in a range of VET learning environments.
 - Applied learning in VET programs for youth.
 - Workplace literacy and numeracy teaching/training.
 - Issues and policies in VET.
 - International education in VET.

Who will be interested in this course?

Many teachers and trainers working in the field have teaching qualifications from the primary or secondary sector, or have been employed because they have particular skills in, for example, ICT, or engaging with youth. Industry trainers may be very experienced, but lack a formal teaching qualification.

This graduate certificate is designed to cater for the needs of all these potential participants, as well as those who just wish to develop an interest.

Delivery

Recent research² has shown that teachers in the literacy and numeracy workforce evince two competing demands: 'face-to-face interaction with colleagues, a practical "hands-on" approach, and peer learning are highly valued modes' (p.4), while at the same time factors of part-time, casual employment, isolation and remoteness (p.7) mitigate against this. The Graduate Certificate teaching methods are designed to cater for both these factors. As far as possible, students will not be limited by having to attend on campus lectures and tutorials, thus allowing for students to access the program from a range of geographical locations and with a range of time commitments.

Development of the course

The story of the development of the course is an interesting one. There has been a feeling for some time that the literacy and numeracy teaching workforce was currently lacking a suitable pathway for post-graduate study. This had the effect of both limiting recognition of the professionalism of the field, and of difficulty in meeting the stated needs of funding bodies for a post-graduate qualified teaching force.

Jan Hagston, known to many readers for her long service to the field explains:

Literacy and numeracy teachers come from a range of backgrounds, but only a relatively small proportion have had the chance to focus on theoretical underpinnings of

literacy and numeracy and to apply theories to their practice. Others are keen to move into teaching adult literacy and numeracy but are not familiar with the pedagogies or the VET sector. This course will provide the opportunity for more formal professional development—and will meet the needs of funding bodies who are keen to see that teachers working in the field have relevant qualifications.

While recognising the needs of the current literacy and numeracy teaching workforce, the developers of the course also recognise that this workforce, along with the Australian workforce in general, is facing demographic challenges. A report published in 2001 (NSW TAFE Access Department) claimed that 78 per cent of L&N teachers would leave teaching in the next five to ten years,³ thus creating a shortage in the near future.

At the same time, the demand is increasing. This can be seen both in developments in Training Package structure and the growing youth profile. Thompson and Foley (2003),⁴ for instance, point to the diversification of adult literacy and numeracy provision in the last decade, and the likelihood that this diversification will continue in the future. This diversification has resulted from the integration of literacy and numeracy into Training Packages and subsequently into vocational training. In turn, this has seen a changing client base and a need to teach students, apprentices or trainees whose English language, literacy and/or numeracy skills are not adequate for the vocational training they have undertaken. Changes in workplace practices (management practice, quality and accountability demands and occupational health and safety requirements), technology and employment patterns require regular attention to the literacy and numeracy skills of those in the workforce.

The Victorian Government's push to increase the retention rate of youth in schools or equivalent (TAFE and ACE organisations) has also seen a changing role for literacy and numeracy teachers who are assisting youth to gain qualifications such as the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL).

Commonwealth Government policy is underpinning the increased importance being given to literacy and numeracy provision. Given the Council of Australian Governments' recognition of the importance of literacy and numeracy skills for young people and adults in relation to workforce participation and productivity, it is also likely that vocational and workplace trainers will increasingly be required to integrate literacy and numeracy skill development into their training. These teachers/trainers will need to upskill to perform this role effectively.

Practical matters

A particularly exciting aspect of the development of the course was the consultation with a full range of stakeholders—including teachers, industry, VALBEC, ACAL, workplace trainers and academics, all of whom provided input to ensure that the course reflected the needs of industry and the workplace, while being informed by the understandings of practitioners and the academy.

Robyn Jackson, director of the School of Social Sciences at Swinburne TAFE and a keen leader in the development of the course, says:

We are very excited at the prospect of delivering this course in 2008. It has been through a rigorous development process and offers a marvellous opportunity to bring together literacy, numeracy and VET professionals in advancing their skills and knowledge and building the capability of the VET workforce.

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... continued from page 6

4. Joy of women's culture

Something else I cherished was, and remains, the positive energy generated by our group's gatherings and afterthoughts. When I think of our times together, images of laughter, compassion, wisdom, gutsiness, generosity, grace and the trust of genuine companionship come to mind. So many jokes were told. So many moral and pedagogical dilemmas aired and examined. So many courageous stories told and applauded. So many delicious biscuits and cakes.

Last words

So, we return to where we began—the formation and identity of Women of Spirit. Our group continues to be a community of practice, one in which we move effortlessly back and forth between being adult learners and adult educators. Our community has a life of its own, with its own practices and protocols, its own rhythms and rituals. We are deeply committed to the ethical foundations of adult education; all of us see a close connection between a commitment to social justice and a broad and deep understanding of spirituality, a multi-dimensional ethos fusing body and mind, head and heart, contemplation and activism.

So, if it ever occurs to you to ask, 'what else do people do on a Saturday instead of going to the footy?', think

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of us and other groups like us, now that *Fancy Footwork* means so much more.

Copies of *Fancy Footwork* are available from VALBEC at <http://www.valbec.org.au/>.

Delia Bradshaw has worked in a variety of roles and contexts in adult education for nearly 30 years and is a life member of VALBEC.

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Technology Matters

Glenda McPherson explains the success of a collaborative learning experiment in the virtual world of Second Life.

Second Life: can we achieve learning outcomes in the virtual world?

Background

In 2006, Central Gippsland Institute of TAFE (known as GippsTAFE) in south-east Victoria won New Practices funding from the Australian Flexible Learning Framework to undertake an educational action research project in virtual worlds. The world chosen for this experiment was Second Life (SL). The project, titled Virtual Worlds—Real Learning! was co-managed by the author (Glenda McPherson) and Malcolm Jolly. We knew that virtual worlds were engaging, but what we wanted to know was whether real vocational learning outcomes could be achieved through learning in SL.

The project was also supported by psychologist Kay Lancefield, and an educational mentor, Delia Bradshaw. More will be said about their role later.

Before deciding on SL as our virtual world, we looked at two or three others, including Active Worlds, which promotes itself as an educational virtual world. We eventually chose SL because it offered the greatest flexibility in terms of being able to create something of our own, rather than having to use what already existed.

SL also offered the opportunity to buy our own private island, where we could have learners away from the rest of SL residents. As in real life, you cannot build or live on another resident's land unless that resident gives you permission to do so. Therefore, if you don't own land you can only participate in places and activities already existing within SL, and only then if they are public spaces or the owners give you permission. By owning a private island away from the mainland, it is invisible to all SL residents apart from those invited. This ensures no strangers or uninvited residents enter. For some learners, particularly the older ones, this offers great safety.

Like most virtual worlds, SL uses an avatar to represent the real person who has logged in. Avatar comes from a Sanskrit term referring to the descended incarnation of a deity. While the standard avatar has human appearance, there is the ability to choose a non-human avatar; for example, a dragon or other mythical creature, an inanimate object, an animal and many more. Some are hybrids, a mixture of human and non-human features.

Right from the outset, we decided not to replicate a classroom or a campus, but rather create a learning environment in which

the learners/avatars could immerse themselves and explore, create, plan, collaborate and learn together.

The project

Two distinct learner cohorts were identified. The first was a group of young mums (18–20 years) undertaking senior Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) except for one intermediate learner; the second learning cohort were Certificate IV in Arts—Interior Decorating learners from 23–35 years. I shall now say a little more about each of these two groups.

VCAL trial

It was decided to undertake the Work-Related Skills module of VCAL in SL. To do this, a holiday resort would be developed on the island owned by GippsTAFE. The students named it Paluma Resort. In the (real life) classroom, students brainstormed the staff roles required to run a holiday resort. They each selected a preferred role, for example, Paluma resort manager, outdoors coordinator, receptionist, etc. Students researched the roles in real life, wrote resumes and applied in writing for their preferred staff role. In SL, they were then interviewed by an unknown project team member who conducted individual job interviews with all the students.

Once the students were appointed to their roles, they set about building and creating a holiday resort with planned activities such as snorkeling, sailing, dancing, motor bike riding and so on. Staff members spent many hours exploring SL for objects and activities for Paluma Resort. Many objects were acquired free while some were purchased using the 'in world' currency, Linden dollars. Staff (that is, the students) developed a uniform that was flexible enough for all the roles—manager and receptionist wore a suit while the outdoor staff wore corresponding t-shirts and shorts. In real life, students used the computer software Publisher to create a Paluma Resort brochure that was sent to another group of VCAL students from a different GippsTAFE campus and other potential tourists to the resort.

On a designated day, about 30 'tourists' arrived at Paluma Resort where the desk 'staff' greeted them and directed them to chosen activities where other staff members ensured the tourists enjoyed their activities and had all their needs catered for—just like a real life holiday resort! Tourists included VCAL students,

local, interstate and international project team members and other invited guests.

Over an eight-week period, VCAL students undertook and completed at least 15 learning outcomes such as ‘plan and organise activities in a work environment’, ‘communicate ideas and information in a work environment’ and ‘work with others in a work environment’.

Certificate IV in Arts—Interior Decorating trial

Students were asked to volunteer to undertake part of the Certificate IV competency ‘interpret and respond to a client brief’ in SL. Students were introduced to SL in a face-to-face orientation session, learning to interact as well as creating their own avatar. Students were also taken as a group into SL to tour houses that were owned by their clients. The clients were project team members not known to the students in real life. At this time, there was much discussion amongst the group as to where the sun rose and set, the feel and structure of the houses, textures, views, local neighbourhood and design ideas that would suit the individual houses, and the limited amount of existing furniture in each house.

A painting and decorating company was set up with teachers as the co-managers of the company and students as the interior decorators. Each student was allocated a client who owned a house in SL that needed some sort of redecorating. For example, one client wanted their upstairs space to be turned into a comfortable and well-lit area for their reading club meetings.

Each student was contacted by instant messaging (IM) in SL, and agreed to meet their client at their SL house. Over a number of meetings, the interior decorator learned about the client’s needs, likes and dislikes, and began developing design ideas with wall colour, furniture textures, lighting, and so on, all in response to their client brief. With the mentoring and support of their co-manager teachers, the students were able to present their design ideas to their clients for a final sign off. The interior decorating students only communicated with and met their clients in SL.

Real-life issues such as time delays, the need for clarity regarding a client’s expectations, meetings times and dates being made, and then being changed, were all experienced in this virtual situation.

Project methodology The VCAL methodology

The VCAL teacher created the avatars for her students and held the passwords. This was done to ensure that the students were only able to access SL in class with the teacher present, either in SL herself or circulating around the classroom. This was a group

of young mums who were not very IT-experienced. The students spent many hours in SL in a supervised and supported manner, experiencing new places and activities as well as collecting objects for their Paluma Resort. Initially, lots of time was spent talking about internet awareness and a range of protective behaviour strategies. Although students were often ‘alone’ in SL, they were all physically in the same classroom and regularly met together in SL or in the classroom talking about where they had been, what they had been doing and who they met, gaining strength from sharing new and/or difficult situations.

The students were constantly dipping in and out of SL. They had experiences of activities necessary for running the resort in the real life classroom, brainstorming, writing resumes, searching the internet, preparing brochures and designing the building and activities. They also met in SL as a team of staff discussing OHS issues, how the activities were to be supervised, what was needed to ensure a wide range of activities and experiences, and technically how they were going to serve drinks, allocate sailing boats and the like.

The Cert IV in Interior Decorating methodology

Students and clients only met in SL, therefore the methodology used had to support this mode. It was imperative that the students created their own avatars using their own email addresses. By creating an avatar of your own, your email address is connected to that avatar and any instant message that is sent in SL when you are offline generates a real email alert. It was using this method that students and clients set up meetings in SL to discuss the clients’ decorating needs.

As a group, they did not spend a lot of time in SL. They were orientated face-to-face into SL, and the houses were toured initially as a group. Once the client and houses were allocated they no longer met as a group in SL; it was then the individual students with their individual clients. Although some meetings between students and teachers occurred in SL, most of the time their teachers supported them in real life rather than in world.

What the students thought

As part of the project, students were asked to reflect on their SL experience in terms of what they learnt as well as how it compared to their traditional classroom learning. Here are a few selected comments:

- Learn to think on your feet
- Hands were sweaty and very nervous—reflecting on interview in SL
- Typing skills improved dramatically
- Even though they had a designated role, once the tourists arrived they were required to answer all client queries and direct them in ways they had not planned or expected
- All our clients were so supportive. It would have been good to have some who didn’t like our ideas



- Knowing the right questions to ask was a challenge
- Texting allowed time to reflect on your response to a question or comment
- The more we enjoyed, the more we learnt.

What the teachers thought

Teachers were also asked to reflect on their SL experience and how it compared to their traditional teaching. Here are some selected comments:

- An opportunity to re-charge my teaching style
- Reminded me of what being a teacher is all about—finding a way of engaging our students so they feel involved in their own learning and enjoy their experience
- The realism was impressive!

Outcomes

The VCAL project demonstrated that students achieved outcomes in much less time than using a standard classroom approach. Students were so eager to get into SL in class that any real-life class activity was very focused and completed

quickly to ensure maximum class time could be spent in SL. The realism of the experience was such that they really did become the staff of the Paluma Resort and they experienced similar workplace experiences as they would in a real workplace; in fact, to a far greater level and well beyond that of a traditional classroom. The students really immersed themselves in SL, and most of them created their own avatars at home and spent many hours of their own time exploring and experiencing the wider SL. However, once the project was finished, only one or two of them remained an active SL resident. Six months later, they still identify their time in SL as their best educational experience.

The teachers of the interior decorating students commented that when the rest of the class studied 'interpret and respond to a client brief' in class, the students who had experienced it in SL asked more insightful questions and the quality of their comments were far superior to those students who had not been in SL. Both students and teachers commented on the realism of the client relationship in SL, and this was seen in a number of

ways. It was observed that when the students met their clients, the student avatar was dressed more professionally than when they were in SL as a group; even their language changed when they addressed their clients. These subtle changes were initiated by the students; they were not prompted by their teachers and it was not explicitly discussed amongst the students. They found it frustrating in the time it took to arrange a meeting with their client, and several planned meetings failed to take place—just like in the real world! They discovered that the questioning of their client was extremely important, and that many times they had either not asked the right question or had asked it the wrong way. The students also commented that SL would be a great place to learn to deal with an uncooperative or unpleasant client for the first time.

An unexpected outcome for the interior decorating students was meeting an architect from the UK in SL, and spending time with him as he showed and explained to them the design principles and themes that are fundamental to his SL and real work. This accidental meeting proved an educationally enriching experience for the students.

Role and contribution of educational mentor and psychologist

Educational mentor

Delia Bradshaw was the educational mentor for the project and wrote an excellent report called *Pedagogical Reflections on teaching and learning in virtual worlds*. The following table of content gives you a sense of the richness of her report:

- Characteristics of Second Life
 - Engagement
 - A 24/7 global online meeting place
 - Creativity
 - Simulations/observations
 - Experimentation
- Benefits for learners
 - Immediacy
 - Expanded horizons
 - An aside: cautions for travellers
 - Self awareness
 - Personal and social capacities
 - Changing times
 - Two questions
- Implications for educators
 - Roles
 - Responsibilities
 - Educational purpose
 - Preparation
 - Educational range
 - Good ideas
 - Action/reflection cycle
 - Professional development opportunities
 - Issues: privacy, harassment, research, time, boundaries, 'reality', wider society

Conclusions

I will quote the Conclusions section from Delia's *Pedagogical Reflections* in full:

A striking conclusion from these pedagogical reflections is the validation of the central role of the teacher. It is tempting to say that the role of the teacher has never been more important. It is simply impossible to imagine the teacher ushering learners into Second Life and then stepping back or withdrawing. Quite the opposite is the case: at every stage, the teacher needs to be fully present, engaged and alert.

If teachers and learners are to achieve the educational wealth inherent in Second Life, there seem to be three key factors that are vital.

The first factor is the provision of TIME for teachers to prepare themselves for inhabiting Second Life as a broad and deep learning environment. This means not only time to become technically proficient, although that is obviously mandatory, but also time to acculturate themselves into this vast online world. Sufficient time is an essential requirement for the cognitive and practical pedagogical preparation teachers need to undertake.

The second factor is the explicit foregrounding and centring of continuous, integrated REFLECTIVENESS. This means incorporating guided dialogues before and after immersion. These are dialogues that prompt learners to think more about the meaning of their Second Life experiences and of the new world—its strengths and weaknesses, its attractions and dangers—that it is opening up to them. For significant learning to occur, it also means enabling learners to connect what they have seen, felt and learnt in a virtual world to their own conceptual and everyday worlds.

The third factor, without which it is difficult to imagine any progress, is PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT. Not only will almost all teachers be venturing forth into 'terra incognita' but they will also be acting as educational guides, responsible for ensuring the safety and wellbeing of their students, as well. The orientation and ongoing support teachers need is comparable to what is mandatory for any educational travel, for any educational exploration of new places.

Future possibilities in Second Life seem limitless. In *The chronicle of higher education: Information technology*, Andrea Foster refers to the potential of Second Life for creating the structure and content of a new public discourse space. Perhaps, the last word should go to Linden Lab's community manager John Lester, known as Pathfinder Linden in-world in Second Life. In an October 2006 article by Kate Cohen in *The Phoenix*, she refers to the Linden vision to let the

educators run with it. 'We would love to see Second Life ... used for things we haven't dreamed of', he (Lester) says, 'for instructors to use it to teach things that could not possibly be taught in the physical world...'

Psychologist

Psychologist Kay Lancefield was a project team member, and her role was to work primarily with the VCAL learners, who were younger, immersed the longest and therefore most at risk of blurring reality with their online experience. Her report *What's a Psychologist Doing in a Place Like This?* therefore concentrates primarily on adolescent role playing and developmental tasks.

Identity formation is a key developmental task of adolescence. Role-play allows participants to experience new identities and how these identities might interact with others, both powerful experiences in developing interpersonal skills. The virtual world provides an adventure playground for personal development; it allows the participant to experience the consequences of behaving and relating as a particular identity free from the real-life consequences of the physical world. This is particularly valuable when trialing new behaviours or when exploring new or risky environments.

Here are Kay's conclusions:

The GippsTAFE Virtual Worlds—Real Learning! project represents an initial step in terms of manipulation of factors relevant to identity and interpersonal efficacy. The psychological principles discussed represent one aspect of the overall project, and relate to process elements to a greater extent than task-based skill acquisition or attainment of traditional educational objectives. In consideration of relevant psychological principles, it is important that the design of virtual world experiences in education clearly identify the project's goals and utilise the elements best suited to achieve the desired outcomes. Psychological frameworks can provide useful constructs pertinent to the parallel processes that occur when utilising role-play as a component of learning, and when targeting interpersonal efficacy within the educational experience.

Summary

Second Life provided both VCAL and Interior Decorating students at GippsTAFE with valuable learning experiences that

could not have been fully replicated in a traditional classroom situation. Even though role-play can and is used in the classroom, it can feel contrived and usually happens as a brief one-off activity. The spontaneity and realism of Second Life provides students with a graphic, experiential and captivating opportunity that can be sustained over an extended period of time. As well, in virtual worlds more complex situations can, in the company of thoughtful educators, be tried first-hand without dire consequences.

Real learning did take place ... and the students (and teachers) loved it!

Post script

Want to know more? A CD was developed covering all aspects of the 2006 Virtual Worlds—Real Learning! project, including Delia and Kay's reports. For a copy, contact Glenda McPherson @ glendam@gippstafe.vic.edu.au and a CD will be mailed to you. For multiple copies contact Clint Smith @ clint.smith@eworks.edu.au

What's happening in 2007?

GippsTAFE is continuing to use Second Life in 2007. A New Practices project focusing on the health and community services sector is exploring the delivery and assessment of competencies that involve elements of risk to the learner, personnel or organisation. GippsTAFE continues to work with young people at Berry Street Victoria and Prahran Neighbourhood House, exploring the use of SL for socialisation and work-related skills. An online business and commerce centre is also being created, with a primary focus on a job information centre in SL to teach job-seeking skills and to offer in-world interviews where students can practice and receive feedback about their interviewing skills.

Glenda McPherson works in the Innovation and Organisational Development department at GippsTAFE where she manages a number of state and national e-learning projects. She also works closely with GippsTAFE teachers to enable them to include more ICT into their practices.

Reference

Cohen, K. (2006), 'Right click to learn', in *The Phoenix*, accessed 9 October 2006. http://www.thephoenix.com/article_ektid20561.aspx

Open Forum

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

Lynne Fitzpatrick and Liz Davidson outline the advice offered by the ACFE-funded CGEA implementation guide, show where to find the guide on the web, and present some examples of frequently asked questions.

Implementing the new CGEA

Adult Community and Further Education (ACFE) has funded the Curriculum Maintenance Manager, General Studies and Further Education, to run three professional development (PD) sessions on the new Certificates in General Education for Adults (CGEA) in 2007. These were held at Newport, Kyabram and Warragul during the first semester. In all, 278 people registered to attend the day-long sessions.

In addition, ACFE has funded the development of an implementation guide, which was trialed at each of the PD sessions with frequently asked questions (FAQs) being added as they were raised in the sessions. Version 3 can be downloaded from the ACFE website <http://www.acfe.vic.gov.au/abtcrr.htm>

The guide provides advice on:

- the Australian training system and the role of the CGEA within it
- the General Studies and Further Education curriculum in Victoria and the CGEA
- finding and using key documents
- identifying the most suitable course for your learners
- using the CGEA Curriculum Document to identify course requirements
- using authentic texts
- developing a cluster program
- integrating literacy units
- interpreting a unit of competency
- developing assessment tools and records.

At the end of each section you will find:

- a list of the key points covered in the section
- frequently asked questions and answers about topics covered in the section
- further information about topics covered in the section.

Examples of the FAQs are:

Q: I am an IT trainer and hold TAA40404 Certificate IV in Training and Assessment. Can I teach and assess the literacy or numeracy units of the CGEA?

A: While holding the TAA04 qualification is a requirement for all teachers and assessors working in VET and adult community education if you are delivering accredited courses, you also need to hold the 'vocational competencies' for the units which you teach and assess.

For teachers of the literacy and numeracy units, the expectation is that you would hold specialist qualifications in teaching adult literacy and numeracy. Refer to Section B 6.2 of the CGEA Curriculum Document and Appendix E, which describes the desirable skills and knowledge of a literacy and numeracy teacher. Having information technology qualifications and experience would not be sufficient to be able to teach and assess the literacy or numeracy units in the CGEA courses.

RTOs setting up CGEA programs should ensure that they develop a strategy for staff selection that is based on all of the stated requirements in Section B: 5.2, 6.2 and Appendix E.

Section B 6.2 also states that teachers 'should have access to professional development to ensure a thorough knowledge of the CGEA qualifications and to ensure professional competence is maintained'.

Q: Do I need to design an assessment that covers all of the elements and performance criteria in the one task?

A: No. How evidence is collected during the course of a program is flexible. Check Section B 5.1 in the CGEA Curriculum Document, and Section 9 in this Implementation Guide for a range of assessment strategies. To be assessed as competent in a unit, a learner must have demonstrated competence in all elements. However, how this is done is not prescribed. This means that, depending on how the task is designed, a number of elements and performance criteria may be covered in the one task or a number of tasks may be used to assess a unit.

Liz Davidson and Lynne Fitzpatrick are part of the at Victoria University-based curriculum maintenance manager team for general studies and further education in Victoria. Liz has taught for many years in secondary and adult ESL programs, and Lynne has worked in the adult literacy field since 1979.

What's Out There?

Fine Print's review of books and resources

Remember the ARIS Bulletin? It was the publication where teachers read reviews of the latest theoretical educational texts, and teaching materials related to adult literacy. Sadly, the bulletin is no more, having gone the way of many value-adding, professional support programs for ALBE teachers in Victoria.

In an effort to keep up the discourse of good teaching practice and professional support, the Fine Print editorial committee has decided to give some space to the occasional review of teaching resources or references.

Literacy Face to Face

reviewed by Sarah Deasey

Literacy Face to Face: A resource for volunteer adult literacy tutors, is a publication that deserves publicity and wide distribution. I took particular interest in this resource as we have a volunteer tutor-training program at Carlton Neighbourhood Learning Centre, and tutors consistently express the desire for help with ongoing planning and teaching materials, particularly when they are starting out for the first time.

Written by Pamela Osmond from the TAFE NSW Access and General Education Curriculum Centre, it was published in 2006 and funded as an ANTA Adult Literacy National Project. Pamela is an experienced TAFE literacy teacher, and has worked as manager of the Reading and Writing Hotline and on other curriculum projects. Some readers may remember her book, *So you want to teach an adult to read*, published in 1985. As Pamela said when I spoke to her about the development of this resource, while the basic methodologies for teaching reading and writing had remained the same, there was a clear need for a new resource which reflected the current students and learning contexts for adult literacy, which have certainly changed since 1985.

This resource was developed primarily for volunteer tutors and teachers delivering tutor-training courses. It is also a welcome addition for adult literacy teachers. It seems a long time since an Australian resource, specifically focused on adult literacy teaching, has appeared—furthermore, a teaching resource that is refreshingly separate from the constraints of accredited curricula.

The impetus for the project came about partly through the excellent conduit of the Reading Writing Hotline, a DEST-funded project that has now been running for approximately 12 years. The Hotline staff had been responding to calls from not only students but also teachers of adult literacy, who were looking for basic resource material. Hotline policy is always

to refer either potential tutors or students to tutor training programs, literacy programs either online or classroom-based. The resource is to be used in addition, not as a substitute for these.

Steven Goldberg, current coordinator of the Hotline and a member of the project team, says in his article 'The job of adult literacy teachers is getting more complex' (*Literacy Link*, vol. 27, no. 4, July 2007), 'The range of students seeking help is diversifying, and our skills need to stay abreast of the changes currently taking place and in the years ahead'. The development of *Literacy Face to Face* was a response to the need to reinforce the principles of good literacy teaching practice.

Literacy Face to Face is made up of nine sections. These sections provide a blend of practical activities and strategies. The first section, 'How do we read?' takes us through the fundamental commonsense theory of reading as a psycholinguistic contextual process, in which the reader employs a number of clues to make sense of texts using the 'flow of language' the 'meaning of the text', 'letter sound clues' and 'the context of the text' to understand and predict meaning. Section 5, 'Writing and spelling', provides a similar focus, again looking at writing as a process, emphasising the importance of modelling, planning, drafting, editing and writing for a range of purposes. The other sections are 'Does your student have a disability?' 'Is your student from a non-English-speaking background?'; 'Everyday numeracy' and 'Getting started on the computer'.

The three remaining sections use the methodology provided to focus on lesson plans and activities for three kinds of learners: 'the beginning reader/writer', 'the intermediate reader/writer', and 'the vocational student'. For each learner there is a focus on the basics such as spelling and writing, but with activities pitched at their particular level.

Each of these sections presents two case studies and lesson plans for typical students who would be working at that level. This format gives a reality and a practical focus for tutors and teachers, and I found these case studies particularly useful when delivering the tutor training program.

The suggested lesson outline for the 'Beginning reader/writer' consists of a language experience story, spelling, handwriting, activities relating to letter sound relationships, and 'Just reading'. The lesson plan for 'Intermediate reader/writer' covers reading, comprehension, reading fluency and cloze cluster analysis. Section 4, 'The vocational student', gives a range of activities for helping the student to understand textbook prose, mind mapping and writing exam and assignment questions. All lessons begin and end with a review.

The resource reflects the current climate that Goldberg describes in his article. Many people who are presenting in our

literacy programs are facing the complex technical literacies of the workplace, home and learning institutions, as well as the range of digital media. Our students are also working at a range of levels.

Literacy Face to Face is a resource that will help tutors plan and structure their sessions according to individual needs, around a solid foundation of good teaching practice.

Literacy Face to Face can be downloaded from <http://www.lg.tafensw.edu.au/facetoface/> either in sections, the full document, or purchased by contacting Access and General Education Curriculum Centre on (02) 9846 8101 (International: 61 2 9846 8101) or email laraine.wiles@tafensw.edu.au

Sarah Deasey is the further education coordinator at the Carlton Neighbourhood Learning Centre. The centre has run volunteer tutor training for one-to-one literacy tuition since 1985.

... continued from page 10

and are accessible to everyone. There are a number that are accessible to speech users.

Resources

There are many resources available on the internet, including worksheets that can be used on a computer. All major newspapers maintain websites where you can get a copy of the story you are going to use with the class already in electronic format.

Paper-based resources can be converted to electronic format using an ordinary scanner with OCR (optical character recognition). This has become a relatively inexpensive technology—you can buy a scanner with software for around \$150—and is not difficult to use. If you can photocopy, you can scan, with the added bonus that you now have your worksheet on the computer as a document ready to be reproduced or modified.

Vision Australia support services

Vision Australia has a number of services designed to support students in mainstream education. These include consultants who can advise about selection of technology, a help desk to assist with problems with adaptive technology, a tertiary education consultant whose role is to support both students

and staff in mainstream education, adaptive technology trainers to advise about using a technology, an adult literacy teacher to advise about specific teaching methods, orthoptists who can advise on vision function, social workers, counsellors, and orientation and mobility instructors. A student might choose to use additional services, but general advice is available for service providers.

Funding opportunities

ACFE-funded providers can apply for funding for adaptive equipment from ACFE in the annual funding round under Delivery Support. TAFE colleges are able to access funding to support students with disabilities.

For further information about services for people who are blind or have low vision, call Vision Australia on 1300 847 466 or visit <http://www.visionaustralia.org.au/>

For information about Guide Dogs Victoria, call (03) 9854 4444 or visit their website at <http://www.guidedogsvictoria.com.au>

Margaret Kelly, language and literacy coordinator, and Renee Williamson, tertiary education consultant, can be contacted at Vision Australia on (03) 9520 5555.

Policy Update

Michelle Circelli looks at several new NCVER research reports that feature some interesting findings on literacy and numeracy training, while Lynn Matheson provides a comprehensive report on last May's successful Living Literacies conference.

The latest NCVER adult literacy and numeracy research

Five new National Centre for Vocational and Educational Research (NCVER) research reports, based on projects funded through the 2005 Adult Literacy Research Program, will be available this year. The reports focus on enhancing the acquisition of language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) skills of refugees, mapping literacy and numeracy provision in community settings, and examining the relevance and responsiveness of current literacy and numeracy training to workplace needs. A workbook for practitioners is also being developed to enhance adult LLN provision.

Enhancing the acquisition of LLN skills of refugees

Two reports, 'Classroom management strategies to address the needs of Sudanese refugees' (released early June 2007), and 'Creating learning spaces for refugees: The role of multicultural organisations in Australia' (forthcoming), draw attention to strategies that enhance the LLN learning experiences of refugees, as well as their employability.

The first report, by Oksana Hull and Ursula Burgoyne, focuses specifically on adult refugee learners from southern Sudan. Many of these learners have been denied access to formal education because of years of conflict and poverty in their home country. As a consequence, they enter English LLN classes in Australia at a very basic level. Through their work, Hull and Burgoyne sought to identify those teaching strategies that worked well for the Sudanese refugee learners and to highlight the areas where their needs were not being met. Current teachers of Sudanese refugee learners were interviewed, as well as non-teaching experts in refugee rehabilitation and resettlement, including representatives from Sudanese community organisations.

Learners from Sudan come from a highly oral cultural background and have well-developed informal learning strategies. The researchers found that programs which require the concurrent development of speaking, listening, reading, writing, numeracy and learning skills may prove to be too great a learning burden. To address this, the researchers call for greater flexibility in course content and outcomes, allowing learners to concentrate initially on oral English language skill development. An additional concern is that the teaching of numeracy appears not to have been a focus for Sudanese

learners, potentially disadvantaging this learner group even further in work opportunities or further education.

In addition to their report, Hull and Burgoyne also developed a good practice guide to assist teachers by providing strategies and advice for designing effective English language, literacy and numeracy programs for all adult learners from highly oral cultural backgrounds. This will be released by NCVER later in the year.

The second report, by Beatriz Miralles-Lombardo, Judith Miralles and Barry Golding, examines how multicultural community organisations, through the programs and informal networks they offer, can help the development of LLN and employability skills of refugees. This study concentrated on three refugee groups from Bosnia, Iraq and Sudan. Using interviews with staff from community organisations and focus groups with refugees, the study looked at the range of factors that enhanced the development of English language, literacy and employability skills. Miralles-Lombardo and colleagues highlight that development of trust between the community organisation and the refugees it seeks to serve is imperative. It is this trust that allows refugees to become involved in learning, whether this is informal or formal. The researchers also found the community organisations provided important informal networks that helped connect the refugees with the wider Australian community.

Mapping literacy and numeracy provision in community settings

In his report, 'Community adult language, literacy and numeracy provision in Australia: Diverse approaches and outcomes' (forthcoming), Darryl Dymock describes the mapping exercise he undertook of non-accredited community-based adult LLN provision occurring across Australia. The report noted that the extent and impact of this provision has been overshadowed in recent years by the emphasis on accredited education and training. A questionnaire was distributed nationally to which 125 providers responded, and seven case studies were undertaken in three states.

Dymock found there was a strong demand for courses from adults who were not interested in or would struggle

with accredited courses. Dymock also found that for these learners, the development of LLN skills occurred in parallel with the development of self-confidence. More than one-third of providers who completed the questionnaire used volunteer tutors and coordinators, an often-unacknowledged community resource. Only about one-quarter of the providers used formal assessment tools; the use of small assessment tasks in combination with perceptions of progress based on observations and student feedback were more common.

The issue of reporting non-accredited LLN was a contentious one with half the providers advocating mandatory reporting, while 30 per cent were opposed. Professional development tends to occur in large organisations compared to smaller organisations (especially those using volunteers), or those in rural areas. The lack of government funding was a major concern for all providers, with this issue tied up with a broader concern, namely the lack of government acknowledgement of the worth of non-accredited LLN provision.

Dymock argues the need for better government recognition and financial support, and ongoing professional development. He also argues for a more sustained approach to monitoring the progress of students' personal growth and LLN skills developments.

The relevance and responsiveness of literacy and numeracy training to workplace needs

'Thinking beyond numbers: Learning numeracy for the future workplace' (forthcoming) by Beth Marr and Jan Hagston, with Sharon Donohue and Peggy Wymond, looks at the numeracy needs of employers and employees, while a report by Ray Townsend and Peter Waterhouse, 'Provision and development? Exploring employers' view of literacy, numeracy and employability' (forthcoming), focuses specifically on the LLN needs of workers as perceived by employers.

How is numeracy learned?

Nobody debates the need for numeracy skills; however, what is not well established is how numeracy skills are best learned in workplaces. The work of Marr and colleagues seeks to redress this. Interviews with various industry representatives (covering peak employer organisations, training boards, unions and employers), and case studies at three work sites (with differing numeracy requirements of their staff) were undertaken. For this study, the researchers unpacked the term 'numeracy' into a number of components: measurement skills, number calculations, reading and interpreting diagrams, using simple formulae, and collection, analysis and interpretation of data.

They found that workers who take responsibility for their own work areas use many numeracy skills, although these are generally embedded within routine tasks and go unrecognised

as numeracy. The implicit use of numeracy skills did not necessarily increase workers' confidence in undertaking explicit numeracy training. The majority of workers did not have a positive experience of secondary school maths education and, as a consequence, preferred training that was informal, immediate and delivered on-the-job by peers or their supervisors. There was a strong preference among the industry representatives for both on-the-floor and off-the-floor training, which had immediate workplace application while also incorporating opportunities for practice and reflection.

To prevent numeracy becoming invisible or overshadowed within the LLN area, Marr and colleagues suggest that numeracy skills are given prominence in training packages, with underpinning knowledge and strategies for their development spelt out in greater detail.

Townsend and Waterhouse interviewed employer representatives from four areas: community services and health, local government, manufacturing, and group training companies. They investigated how the employers understood the provision—by schools, universities, vocational and adult education and training sector—and continuing development—by the employer—of literacy, numeracy and employability skills for their particular workplaces.

Townsend and Waterhouse found that employers recognise that it is not always possible for the education and training system to provide skilled workers on demand, and the responsibility for the development of literacy, numeracy and employability skills lies with the training system and the employer. Employers who are successfully addressing the development and demonstration of literacy and numeracy skills provided a supportive workplace learning culture, and had pragmatic processes in place to help assist the ongoing development of these skills. However, the researchers note that employers need support to build effective learning organisations where ongoing skill development is embraced by all employees from the shop floor to management. The challenge for education and training providers is to work to ensure that the training meets the literacy, numeracy and employability skills needed by learners before they become employed.

Practitioner resource

Peter Waterhouse is also working with Crina Virgona to produce a practitioner resource, based on findings from their study of the interactional style of adult literacy educators and community health and welfare professionals. The practitioner resource is focused on strength-based practice (SBP), a technique more commonly used in the community health and welfare sector. SBP concentrates on the strengths, capacities and aspirations of individuals as a catalyst for positive change and growth. The resource will provide information about SBP, who uses it and why, its application to adult education, as well

as examples of SBP strategies. The resource will be released by NCVER later this year.

New research projects currently underway

- Darryl Dymock and Stephen Billet build on Dymock's aforementioned study investigating the extent of non-accredited community-based LLN provision in Australia. This current project aims to identify the range of outcomes that accrue from participation in non-accredited community adult LLN programs across a variety of client groups. From this it is intended to develop and test a portfolio of best practice tools from which coordinators, teachers and tutors can select for monitoring individual student progress.
- Stephen Black, Ian Falk and Jo Balatti are looking at approaches to language, literacy and numeracy skills development which deliberately draw on and build social capital. The researchers will focus on three sectors—health, finance and justice. By examining in detail an effective collaboration from each sector, the research will show how to implement social capital approaches to adult literacy and numeracy development.
- The impact of an intensive reading approach in adult literacy will be assessed in a study by Helen de Silva Joyce, Sue Hood, and David Rose. The researchers will examine

the best way to inform and train teachers who are delivering English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and Adult Basic Education (ABE) how to implement an intensive and scaffolded approach to the challenge of teaching reading. The project aims to contribute to the professional development in reading pedagogy, improve support for teachers, and enhance learning opportunities of ESOL and ABE students.

The Adult Literacy and Numeracy Research Program is funded under the Adult Literacy National Project by the Australian Government through the Department of Education, Science and Training.

For more information contact Michelle Circelli at michelle.circelli@ncver.edu.au.

Check up on current research projects at the NCVER website: www.ncver.edu.au.

Michelle Circelli is a senior research officer with the National Centre for Vocational Education and Training. She is currently managing the adult literacy research program, as well as a number of other research projects commissioned through the national VET research and evaluation program.

VALBEC conference report 2007

Living Literacies, 4 May 2007, William Angliss Conference centre

How better to exemplify Living Literacies than to begin and end the conference with song? The capacity audience of 170 were soon singing along with Chris Falk about 'rhythm and syncopation' that reminded us of the simple foundations of literacy and numeracy that we take for granted in our everyday lives. The mood was set for a day of engagement and stimulation. As one participant put it, 'We were taken out of our comfort zone and doesn't that remind us of how it is for others?'

Another participant wrote that it reminded her 'that singing can be an effective teaching strategy, especially for students whose cultural literacies are oral'.

How fortunate we were to have the delightful Herb call in to play a gumleaf welcome that segued perfectly into the keynote address. Margaret Somerville explored new literacies and the place of stories in our students' lives with her moving and thought provoking keynote address combining images, words and song. We all responded to Archie Roach's haunting voice that blended with her presentation with powerful impact. Her

journey and work with indigenous Australians was conveyed warmly and honestly, and struck chords with the audience on many levels.

Meaningful in a captivating way, with a nice metaphor of place.

Identifying with place and language and family is often what students need to feel secure and ready to learn.

Lots to think about and the affirmation that history and identity is important to our students.

In the course of the program of eighteen workshops there were many opportunities to consider innovative teaching strategies and approaches to a range of adult learners. Each session was presented professionally by practitioners using a range of stimuli such as film, science, computer technology, everyday numeracy, theatre and even mobile phones. Observing each room during these sessions, there was a real buzz of commitment and energy emanating with much talk and laughter. The high standard and range of presentations was much commented on in the evaluations and amongst the crowd at morning tea and lunch.

Passion 1, science passion 2. Literacy = what happens when two passions meet!

Marvellous, just marvellous. It was so rich and gorgeous it made me cry.

Superb. Fascinating. These ladies are onto a good thing. I would love to try this with my students tomorrow.

Great ideas and resources, enough to get my next VCAL class going.

The two-hour session conducted by Dave Tout and Philippa McLean on the new CGEA was hugely popular and fully subscribed, with 50 participants. It was greatly appreciated, and complemented the pre-conference ‘communities of practice’ sessions held at Victoria University and attended by 47 people. The hands-on approach adopted in these sessions gave participants opportunities to share knowledge and develop clearer understandings of the work ahead in implementing the new CGEA to take back to their workplaces. Engaging with the documents and having questions answered in an open forum were effective strategies.

Good to work with others and see that many are grappling with it.

Very good—allowed us to become familiar with the nitty-gritty.

Good opportunity to start getting inside the document. I don't feel quite so daunted by it now.

Arnold Zable brought everyone together for a final keynote at the end of the day that was in equal measures emotional and humorous. He reminded us of the importance of stories in our lives, and the privilege of being a listener in our role as teacher. The points he made about the transformative power of story echoed Margaret's words from the start of the day. The performance that emerged from the Songs and Meaning workshop was a perfect coda to the day and so beautifully completed the program:

Everyone's got a story to tell.

Hope stretches limits of what's possible.

Thinking in new ways 'bout problems of old.

Open the gates and let ideas come in.

By telling my story I find my place.

Writing and talking and texting and song.

Trusting relationships help us to grow.

The lives we are changing are also our own.

The conference review and close had a nice feel of collegiality as some of our colleagues from past times arrived. The refreshments that followed in the foyer gave time for continued conversations, and this year provided a platform for the book launch of *Fancy Footwork*—adult educators thinking on their feet—a collection of writing by women adult educators. The conference was a success and, as always, thanks to the generosity and commitment of so many wonderful people. It really is a highpoint of the year, and achieved VALBEC's goal of providing high quality professional development to its members and the ALBE field. The 97 evaluations used for comments for this report affirmed what the committee felt about the importance of the conference, and are encapsulated in the last three comments:

Thank you for continuing to run this conference. Us country folk look forward to it each year. It provides the chance for us all from different campuses to touch base and work together.

Good to catch up with people and network.

I am so glad I came to this conference. It was excellent. I've learnt heaps. Thank you!

Thank you to all the presenters and members who support the conference, and we trust that you will all come back next year.

Lynne Matheson is co-president of VALBEC.

Foreign Correspondence

A wet Belfast weekend did nothing to dampen the spirits of those attending the annual Research and Practice in Adult Literacy (RaPAL) conference. And as VALBEC 'ambassador' Beverley Campbell found, the preoccupations of literacy educators are much the same wherever you travel.

B is for Belfast

In June this year I was lucky enough to travel to Belfast for the annual RaPAL (Research and Practice in Adult Literacy, www.rapal.org.uk) conference. The conference theme this year was 'Learners' Journeys: voices and identities in adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL', and many of the delegates had made long journeys, metaphorical or literal, to participate in this conference, held for the first time in RaPAL's twenty-three history in Northern Ireland.

By far the largest proportion of delegates were from Ireland, north and south, and from England and Scotland. Although the conference, held annually, is not promoted as an international conference, delegates had made the journey from as far away as Canada, USA, Brazil, South Africa and Australia. The conference venue was the historic Queen's University in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Next year it will be held in the Republic of Ireland, possibly in Galway. Delegates stayed at Queen's Elms, the student residential village, a fifteen-minute walk from the university campus. RaPAL is the sister organisation to ACAL, and there have been strong links in the past between ACAL and RaPAL.

This conference provided another opportunity to strengthen those links. Generous financial assistance from VALBEC enabled me to attend the conference as an ambassador for VALBEC, and to present a workshop entitled 'Views from a spiral staircase—an episodic adventure of an adult literacy professional journey'. June in Ireland is often wet, but this June was particularly wet, with floods in the streets of Belfast the day before the conference started and two days of solid rain during the conference. Locals were apologising for the wet weather!

Belfast is an attractive and vibrant city and now that the Troubles in Belfast are over and relative peace has descended on the city, visitors and tourists are being drawn to Northern Ireland. That the conference was finally able to be held in Belfast was some cause for celebration. There is a sense of relief in the city that the people can get on with life without having to worry about the violence in the streets. But to attend a conference in Belfast was also a reminder of the city's recent history which had kept many visitors away. Another reminder of where we were meeting was the presence of the 18th Century Irish History Association, whose conference was meeting in adjoining rooms to the RaPAL conference.

The adult literacy field in the UK seems to be less theorised than the field in Victoria, but a broad representation of people from adult learners through to teacher educators gathered to discuss theoretical and pedagogical issues similar to those that preoccupy the adult literacy field in Victoria: the terminology of literacies or literacy, issues of good practice in assessment, what are effective models of teacher education? I attended a workshop by Daniel Ferraz from Brazil on developing a critical literacy approach in university English classes through the use of image, and another by Snoeks Desmond, director of the Family Literacy Project in Kwa Zulu Natal, South Africa (www.familyliteracyproject.co.za). Snoeks gave an overview of her program, as well as describing the use of REFLECT (Regenerated Freirean literacy through empowering community techniques) in the program's work with families.

Other incidental conversations left deep impressions on me: the man who works with homeless people and their literacy needs, another who works with a literacy program for travellers, another who talked about how much of literacy work is healing work, and another who described his work as literacy coordinator in the isolated region around Aberdeen in Scotland, and then the coordinator who is trying to decide whether to embark on doctoral studies, and what that might mean for her family.

Perhaps the most striking difference between the RaPAL conference and VALBEC conferences was the space given to adult learners in the two-day program. A preconference program put the focus fully on adult learners and included the launch of the Literacy Travellers' Tree and the West Belfast Alphabet devised by learners of the Workforce Training Services in west Belfast. Not just any alphabet, this alphabet was a reminder that these learners lived and worked in Belfast with its troubled history. F for Falls Road, S for Shankill Road or P for Protestant were daily reminders that these learners lived in a divided city.

The next day during the lunch break, space was also given to learners' voices. A program included learners reading aloud their poems and other writings. The most moving piece was written by the wife of one of the Guilford Four, whose husband had been tried, found guilty, and imprisoned by the British legal system for something he didn't do. Another group of

Continued on page 36 ...

Beside the Whiteboard—where are they now?

In 1997 Nick Oliver was teaching literacy to new arrivals in the Adult Migrant Education Program at Canberra Institute of Technology. Most of these students had never used a computer. VALBEC co-president and Fine Print committee member Lynne Matheson spoke with Nick in 1997 and then again in 2007.

... back in 1997: Why teach computer literacy when there are so many competing demands on a learner's time?

Computer literacy offers the possibilities of emancipation through application of literacy skills for personal, social and political advantage. For my learners, computer literacy skills are most immediately important as a tool through which to continue to study and enter the workforce. The potential for networks to empower citizens in this practical sphere of human interaction is incredible.

Access to this world of communication however, requires special skills such as reading, writing and basic knowledge of software and hardware. These skills are essential for people to have access to the exciting world of ITRC chat, forums, discussion groups and email. None of this should be thought of as substitutes for quality teacher time. It is a new medium of communication offering interesting possibilities for teaching and learning and most importantly talking.

How can information technology (IT) be incorporated into the already crowded curriculum?

Computer literacy should no longer be viewed as a special domain all of its own. It is after all merely a new medium through which to use literacy skills such as reading and writing.

Contrary to popular belief, computer literacy is best taught out of the sterile environment of a computer laboratory, and in context of real learning situations that are more likely to be happening in geography, mathematics or, in my case, adult migrant English classes. This means taking computers out of laboratories where they demand their own place in the timetable, as well as putting them in classrooms where teachers and learners can use them. Content should not suffer in order for computer literacy to be achieved.

Fast forward to 2007. When we recently caught up with Nick, he provided the following update on his career.

Since 1997, I've left TAFE and taught in colleges and secondary schools for six years. Three years ago my wife and I moved back to Melbourne and I returned to adult education working for a training company in Melbourne. I've loved my time in public education, both adult and secondary, and sometimes think I'd like to do it again—then I remember playground duty and reports.

These days I train rather than teach computer applications from MS Project™ to Photoshop™ and Illustrator™. The classes are small and people have paid heaps to attend. I still love teaching, and don't mind what program or level it is. So long as there are people who can't push a mouse, there is a job for me.

What have been some of the challenges and highlights of working in adult literacy/ESL/ education or workplace training?

I find these beginner classes with small numbers of participants and low background skills the most challenging and rewarding in my work. How do you explain right-clicking or operating systems to a senior construction engineer who has never turned on a computer, and feels anxious about learning so late in life? ESL teaching is necessarily personal and beginners' courses in IT need to be as well. The challenge and delight of teaching is in the moment of interpersonal communication, and the richer this is, the better the outcomes for everyone concerned.

What or who have been some of the influences on your teaching practice?

All of the outstanding ESL teachers whom I knew at the old CIT's AMEP program, sadly have moved on or retired. I am reminded of a demonstration lesson Jenny Osborne did at CIT in the 1990s, where she taught a new arrivals class to tell the time using a drama technique. She used her whole body to teach—gestures, voice and movement. She used the participants' own knowledge of the process, drawing it out dramatically and gradually bringing spoken production into the activity. By the end of the session everyone could read the time, in not only English, but every language of the participants. I've kept this activity in mind and it inspires me when I teach low-level IT classes.

What advice would you have for anyone starting out in adult education?

Think about what you are going to be good at, training or teaching? Much adult education is actually more about training, is that going to be enough for you? Everyone says it, but be flexible. The trainer or teacher who can deliver the greatest range of classes gets the job. Being brilliant at two classes is not nearly as interesting to the head of department as being passable at five.

Continued on page 36 ...

... continued from page 34

learners had travelled with their coordinator from Edinburgh by train, ferry and train to give a workshop on dyslexia.

The conference was a well organised but low-key event with only one plenary address given by Inez Bailey, director of Ireland's National Adult Literacy Agency, on adult literacy learners and identity. The main work of the conference was done in the workshop sessions and in the networking in the associated conference activities—poetry reading one night and a conference dinner the next night, with an engaging Irish story teller as post-dinner entertainment. As with most conferences, perhaps the most important aspect of being there was the networking that took place.

I reconnected with old friends Mary Hamilton from Lancaster University, Catherine Macrae from CLAN in Edinburgh, a multimedia resource centre for adult literacy and numeracy (www.resources.clanedinburgh.org), and Susan Bates, formally

from Perth and now engaged in literacy work in Renfrewshire, near Glasgow. Attending professional conferences is about maintaining tribal identity. My attendance at the RaPAL conference made me feel very much part of an international tribe of professionals committed to the idea of providing a multitude of opportunities where adults might access literacy and numeracy education—and continually concerned about how to make good practice better.

After a week enjoying Belfast's hospitality I had another great week travelling on a rail pass in the south of Ireland, being a tourist in Dublin, Killarney and Cork.

Beverley Campbell has enjoyed 25 years involvement in adult literacy education, including community and higher education, professional development and research. She is currently working on a commissioned history of VALBEC and *Fine Print* to celebrate VALBEC's 30th anniversary in 2008.

... continued from page 35

The adult education sector's opportunities are mainly contract and casual, and it can be a long road to get a permanent role. With that in mind however, the professional trainer commands very high hourly and daily rates in excess of \$500

a day, which makes for a brilliant way to balance work and family life.

Thanks for catching up with us, Nick, and best wishes for the future.