The 2011 Arch Nelson Address by Dr Pauline O'Maley

We make the road by walking

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you here today. It is both a privilege and the stuff of my nightmares, and I have had a few in recent weeks!! This is the ACAL traditional Arch Nelson address and, as such, it is appropriate to focus on one of the principles that Arch Nelson himself, inaugural, longstanding and influential president of ACAL, valued and enacted so effectively, focusing on community.

Others have had the gig before me, I have, in listening to the Arch Nelson addressees over many years, enjoyed visits to virtual libraries, flights of imagination and golden magpie geese, personal museum exhibits of great interest, and a rather lively debate that had something to do with trolls and bridges - a hard and oh so varied act to follow!

J.S Ryan (1998) in his tribute to Arch at the time of his death talked of his and his university's emphasis on the necessity of imagination, the ability to work together, and on encouraging personal objectivity and the feeling of belonging proudly to one's own group and place. Conferences like this one give us some space to reflect, rethink our principles and our place, and hopefully renew our energy for the road ahead.

The focus of Arch's work was on community building, on working together. I would like to take up this notion of working together and the way it resonates in the conference theme of *Literacy on the Map: common visions, shared pathways* as a springboard to reflect on the work of adult literacy teachers over time. Of course it is a personal and a partial view and I am also very aware it is somewhat presumptuous and naive to take this approach. Some of you may be disappointed by what you see as silences, gaps and flaws in my presentation, I can live with this, I see it as a part of an ongoing dialogue I look forward to other instalments and passionate conversations with you about the work we do and the sometimes contested ways in which we conceive and enact it. My concern is not to ignore or gloss over ways in which we differ, I am interested in interrogating these for they form the basis of learning, but I am also wary about getting lost in a debate about these. My focus here, therefore, will not be about ways in which we differ but rather ways in which we don't.

Paulo Freire and Myles Horton (1990) wrote an influential book about education which they called *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change* - a title that is apt in relation to our conference theme and one that has, for a long time, resonated with me. They adapted this title from a proverb by the Spanish poet Antonio Machado, one line of which reads, in translation, 'you make the way as you go'.

There are several images that come to mind for me whenever I think about this image of us making our road by walking and the optimism it offers us in the eternal present tense of possibility.

The communal act of walking

As a teenager at boarding school (Catholic of course - what else, why else this ridiculous confessional mode?!) I had the pleasure of walking every Sunday, two nuns at the front and pairs of girls in a long crocodile walking for a couple of hours (I won't go into what a frightening and comical sight we must have made, tunics carefully covering the knee, 40 denier school stockings – no glimpse of flesh – and oh so cute little felt or straw hats. Alas some of you cannot even imagine what I am talking about, it is an image of so long ago, and others, and don't think I can't see you,

know exactly what I am talking about!). I enjoyed these walks and think of them and the art of walking very positively. Walking is active, measured, consistent, and meditative and often, as it was for me in that far away world, done with others as a communal act.

When we are making our educational roads we do so with others, if we misstep or have to dance two steps back for every one forward we do so in joint collaboration and mutual engagement, negotiating, creating and learning as we go.

When I first started working with adult literacy in a community setting I worked for a supported employment service, they were specialists at supporting folk with mental illness back into work, they did so in a wonderfully calm and inclusive environment. On my first day the manager of the service summed up simply what he saw as the work they did by saying 'we walk along the road a little with people'.

So, let's talk about this road we walk and the walking we have done, are doing and will continue to do, sometimes in step with others sometimes out of step. Not just as an exercise in nostalgia that can bring a warm flood of emotion but because the gift of occasions like these are they afford us the time to stop and consider what we do, why we do it and the agency of teachers and students in literacy classes in the 21st century in Australia. How did we get here? Why by this path? What influences do we have on future paths that will be taken? On our path there have been losses and gains, many here have felt them personally and they have also had particular impacts for adult literacy students. We know of the interrelationship between the ways in which literacy can be conceptualised and the impact of its conceptualisation in policy. We are only too familiar with the way that intersection plays out in practice. Rosie Wickert's reflection on policy activism in the late 80s, *Politics, activism and the process of policy production: Adult Literacy in Australia,* is pertinent here. Rosie is quite clear that the process for her was ambiguous, both pleasurable and exciting and divisive and unsettling (2002, p87), that the work is messy and has an element of chance (ibid, p79), that much can be gained but also much is lost (ibid, p82), that content is important in policy production but context is equally important (ibid) and that policy production is tied up with power (ibid, p89). In 1991 the ALLP promised much, since that time there has been great debate about what it delivered but I think an agreement that a lot of what it delivered was both unexpected and unwelcome. But what came before 1991 and what reflections on that time do practitioners have?

The road as it is looking back

I missed the halcyon days, I, like many of you I imagine, came to the field on the back of the ALLP. Bev Campbell in her wonderful book on the history of VALBEC in Victoria, as viewed through the lens of the journal *Fine Print,* gives a rich and complex account of the birth of adult literacy in Victoria. And the way in which it moved from being a grass roots movement into a 'joined –up' field (Could I, as an aside – and how I love an aside - say I did so want to use the term 'joined up' here once today. My son had an inspiring and engaging Latin teacher who would challenge them to use particular terms she had given them in their exam answers, this is my salute to you Ms Tarr! And listen up please because 'joined up' is not the only term I have challenged myself to use!).

In relation to this journey Bev says 'I have experienced the sense of belonging to a community of fellow travellers' (2009, p. xv) and counterbalances this with 'I have experienced the pedagogical struggles and tensions of the adult literacy field' (ibid, p.xv). For Bev 'professional identity is formed through struggle and is constantly changing, as teachers make choices about how to act from available, and often conflicting, subject positions' (ibid, p. xv111).

So Bev's account of the journey focuses on struggle, on change, on the historically situated nature of practice, but always in counterbalance with energy, with camaraderie, with passionate engagement.

She speaks of influences like Paulo Freire's (1972) social justice approach and his notion of reading the word to read the world, of Brian Street's (1984) autonomous and ideological models of literacy, of the work of David Barton and others (1991, 1994, 2000) on literacy as social practice and the work of the New London Group (1996) on multiliteracies. She describes an earlier time when theories and pedagogical approaches were seemingly uncontested and leads us to a time of discursive change and discursive tension around literacy and numeracy, a time when, as Marginson (1992) points out, the combination of economic rationalism and education has bought two different worlds into collision.

All roads lead to Rome

Over the last twenty years the majority of adult literacy provision has been grounded in neo-liberal discourses with an emphasis on human capital. This discursive space has bought money and in some ways mainstream legitimacy to literacy and numeracy, but we also know that this alignment to economic rationalism principles of competitiveness, performativity (Lyotard, 1984) and narrowly conceived criteria has been at a cost, there has been loss in terms of possibility.

For adult literacy teachers in the field at that time ' the experience of achieving a public policy commitment seemed paradoxically to trigger the dismantling of what they had know as adult literacy in Australia' (Wickert, 2002, p75). For many it was a case of be careful what you wish for ...

There were many unforseen effects in this new landscape that colonised adult literacy within an economic discourse, and thus as quasi mainstream. The discourses of social justice, personal agency and human rights were silenced in favour of the discourse of vocationalism and human capital. While the number of classes dramatically increased these were and continue to be staffed by a highly marginalised, casualised, predominately aging female workforce. Nevertheless this post ALLP gain of an explosion of classes, was also matched at the time by an expansion of professional development opportunities and money was dedicated to research. Time has eroded those gains.

This narrow focus on vocationalism and the reductive discourse of competency based training that has been matched by an approach that sees majority funding aligned to competitive tendering has had a significant effect on the continued increase of casualisation of teachers in this sector and the attendant problems of loss of expertise, disintegration of professional networks, lack of ongoing professional development and crumbling infrastructures. I agree with Allan Luke's point of view if 'we don't invest in professional development we should give up' (2001, p.23), shifting the burden of professional development of teachers to providers who have tendered at the lowest level for viability is, I believe, a dereliction of duty on the government's behalf. These providers are often unable to fulfill their professional development obligations and the teachers and students bear the brunt of this. As in other education sectors there is an increasing expectation of doing more with less resources.

A lot of the rhetoric around literacy and numeracy within this model centres on notions of building a knowledge society and the need for workers and potential workers within this knowledge society. I have always taken the view that if governments want to equip workers for these 'new times' then focussing literacy provision, for example in LLNP, predominately at the lower ACSF levels simply makes limited sense. These knowledge society worker bees will need to have literacy capability that goes well beyond ACSF one, two or even three. Therein lies one of the elemental

contradictions of this discourse. I agree with Hall (1996) that these 'new times' are paradoxical, contradictory and ambiguous and that there is a complex interrelationship between the political, economic, social, cultural and moral impacts. These impacts continue to affect teachers and students. If the students in LLNP classes are not being equipped with the complex literacies and numeracies they need to be part of the knowledge society, why are they there?

We know literacy continues to act as a social shock absorber (Luke , 2001), 'a continually contested and unfinished concept, an empty canvas upon which anxieties and aspirations from the popular imagination and public morality are drawn' (Green, Hodgen and Luke,1997,p.11) yet conceiving literacy in this narrow way stifles opportunity and limits the range of students. Where is the voice of the student in this dominant human capital discourse? What opportunities are there for their aspirations to be foregrounded? What does success mean for them?

Within this discursive space large scale surveys like ALLS become important to quantify the link between 'literacy, education and prosperity' (Hamilton and Barton, 2000), governments of all persuasions are eager to see how we fare against other countries. Further as Hamilton and Barton point out these surveys are powerful in shaping 'the vision that funds literacy programmes around the world' (p.378) yet they only present a partial view. In Australia money that had previously supported adult literacy has been diverted into these surveys, dedicated LLN research funding has been lost, ACAL funding has been lost, while the Reading and Writing Hotline continues somewhat precariously, but at the same time the data gained from these surveys is underutilised. It seems there is no gain here for adult literacy practitioners and students. Rather, it is hard not to think cynically that the purpose of being involved in these surveys is merely to be in the game, and to provide sound bytes for the press, sound bytes that are very much grounded in the discourse of deficit, conversations about what Australian workers and potential workers don't have rather than focussing on the funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al, 2005) they do have and ways this can be built on, strengthened and developed.

There have been challenges on this highway, as well as detours, side trips and dead ends. Serendipity and chance have played a role in this push/pull space as we have gathered some resources for the road ahead. As Bev Campbell says professional identity is formed through struggle and is constantly changing (2009, p, xviii).

Luke sounds a word of warning when he suggests many of us suffer from what he calls a kind of postwar generational change fatigue (1999), he said this is 1999, no wonder I feel exhausted now! One of the challenges for us is to conserve our energy and our optimism and to seek out and work with folk who have an abundance of both.

The possibilities of the road/s ahead

I believe we have now a moment in time for adult literacy, there seems to be a renewed focus on it to go with a potential new strategy and a commitment to more money for literacy and numeracy programs, although, I note, only programs that are related to employment. Industry is also responding to what they call the language, literacy and numeracy challenge, with their unfortunately named *No More Excuses* report. Yet this vocational focus is still very much just a part of the picture, it still focuses on human capital and economics, without equally privileging the social and cultural. The work of Stephen Black, Jo Balatti and Ian Falk (see for example, 2009, 2006) on the social capital outcomes of LLN classes makes the salient and pertinent point that literacy and numeracy improvement is often dependant on social capital outcomes. The complex interrelationships among literacy, employment, social inclusion and health are under researched in this country.

There continues to be international work that is grounded in broad conceptualisations of literacy and numeracy. For example the work of UNESCO which continues to frame literacy in terms of human rights and the OECD whose secretary-general, Mr Angel Gurría, in a speech to the commission in 2009, welcomed their call for a change in emphasis in how we measure economic performance and social progress – to move away from a series of indicators based on production to one based on people's wellbeing. A focus on wellbeing may also open up the dialogue on literacy and numeracy opportunities and needs beyond the traditional classroom, this is an area that ACAL, with its focus on literacy and numeracy as both lifelong and lifewide, has tried and struggled to maintain a focus on for a number of years (see for example Hartley & Horne, 2006 and Wickert & McGuirk, 2005) but it is an area that is primarily focused more on social inclusion and individual wellbeing rather than economic sustainability, and this may be why it is an area that has failed to gain traction.

Having spent the last twelve years working for the Salvation Army mainly in a drug and alcohol services funded program I feel I have been somewhat apart from a world driven by accountability and performativity. Having edged out of my billabong and into the mainstream this year in coming to Victoria University I have had the delight of working with folk who have done and are doing some remarkable work across three sectors, some of which you have heard about here in the last few days. Economics may remain the master discourse (Fitzclarence& Kenway, 1993) but it is not the only discourse, and our walk continues working against reductionist discourses, the discourse of performativity, of deficit and outside a regime that is focused punitively on responsibility and obligation. One that is focused on a view of a learner as subject not object, on building on and valuing students' own funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al, 2005), of rights, values, notions of trust and agency, on working with students to open up discursive opportunities and possibilities of their choice as we together continue to strive towards the better day. James Gee (1996) says literacy teaching not for the timid, a touch of hyperbole perhaps? I think not. The consequences, as we know, reverberate down the years. I don't suggest there is anything new in what I say here, some of you folk have been doing this for more years that you may care to remember, long may you continue. I urge you to continue to work together with an eye to the future.

Thanks to ACAL and VALBEC for another thought-provoking forum and conference. They have again provided us with variety and stimulation, workshops have focused on a range of environments including museums and health settings, as well as diverse locations; local, rural, remote, and international; much from our enthusiastic colleagues from across the ditch as well as programs from places as diverse as South Africa and Timor Leste It is great to see the emerging focus on tertiary literacy. Thanks to ACAL and all state organisations for the work they are doing and will continue to do to open up spaces for conversations about literacy and numeracy policy and practice. This year the Federal Government has sought feedback on its National Foundations Skills Strategy for Adults. ACAL took the lead early, seeking feedback from members, engaging in online debate, attending forums and submitting a paper to DEEWR. Stephen Black and Keiko Yasukawa ably started this process with their paper *Time for National renewal: Australian adult literacy and numeracy as 'foundation skills'*(2010) which focused on four key areas for action, social capital, cross-sectoral partnerships, integration and professional renewal. ACAL's *Some Suggestions Towards A New Strategy*, prepared by Rosie Wickert, picks up these areas and proposes the establishment of a foundation skills learning improvement and support network, a national think-tank preceding the establishment of a foundation skills advisory council, incentives to achieve funding to support effective integration of foundation skills with VET and research, particularly longitudinal tracking studies and evaluations of different approaches and programs.

We need now, as Margaret Mc Hugh has so succinctly put it, to put the E back into VET, and develop that E into broader contexts both in and out of classrooms. We must continue to work the

relationship among theory, method and pedagogical practice, having explicit conversations about what this practice constitutes –a multi-voiced exploration of what works where and why. Students need to be a part of this conversation. And of course research. I have tried to consciously work here, not always successfully, against lamentation, but just one lament please – if the government is going to fund, to the tune of millions of dollars, mass surveys then I ask them to take the next step and reinstate research funding which can be used to maximise the worth of this data, here we can learn much from the work that has been done in Canada (see for example, Statistics Canada & OECD, 2005, Canadian Council on Learning, 2007).

So – now I can hear the music begin to swell, the low throb of the drums, the violins lifting us up. It may be an inappropriate time for another confession but old habits die hard – I was rejected as a choir member when I was at school, couldn't hold a note – one day, one winter's day with many choir members sick, and needing numbers to produce a soaring of voices into the heavens for a funeral, a call went out – anybody could join the choir that day – yes at last I was in- then the clarification – anyone but me! Now I don't want you to think that I have been scarred by that experience, that my whole life has been one long search for a microphone all to myself and an audience such as you, but here we go, join me if you will.....

'So be strong,

Reach the stars now,

Walk away

Walk on'

That sound you are hearing is Matt Munroe and a host of nuns rolling in their graves.

Sometimes on key, sometimes clearly not, the walk continues.

Thank you!

References

ACAL 2011, Some Suggestions Towards A New Strategy

Balatti, J. Black, S. & Falk, I 2006, *Reframing adult literacy and numeracy course outcomes: A social capital perspective,* National Centre for Vocational Education Research, Adelaide.

Balatti, J. Black, S. & Falk, I 2009, *A new social capital paradigm for adult literacy: Partnerships, policy and pedagogy*, National Centre for Vocational Education Research, Adelaide.

Black, S & Yasukawa, K 2010, Time for National renewal: Australian adult literacy and numeracy as 'foundation skills', *Literacy and Numeracy Studies,* vol 18, no 2, pp. 43-57.

Black, S & Yasukawa, K 2011, Beyond Deficit Approaches to Teaching and Learning: Literacy and Numeracy in VET Courses, Paper presented at the AVETRA Conference, Melbourne.

Barton, D 1994, *Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language,* Blackwell, Oxford.

Barton, D. Hamilton, M & Ivanič, R (eds) 2000, *Situated Literacies: reading and Writing in Contexts,* Routledge, London and New York.

Barton, D & Ivanič, R (eds) 1991, *Writing in the Community,* Sage, London.

Canadian Council on Learning, 2007 Health Literacy in Canada: Initial results from the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey Canadian Council on Learning, Ottawa.

Campbell, B 2009, *Reading the Fine Print: A History of the Victorian Adult literacy and basic Education Council (VALBEC) 1978-2008,* Victorian Adult literacy and Basic education Council, Melbourne.

Fitzclarence, L & Kenway, J 1993, Education and Social Justice in the Post Modern Age. in Lingard, B. Knight, J & Porter, P (eds) *Schooling Reform in Hard Times,* Falmer Press, London.

Freire, P 1972, *Pedogogy of the Oppressed,* Penguin Education, Harmonsworth England.

Freire, P & Horton, M 1990 *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change,* Temple University Press, Philadelphia.

Gee, J 1996, *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourse (2nd* edition), Taylor and Francis Ltd, London.

Gonzalez, N. Moll, L& Amanti, C 2005, *Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practices in Households and Classrooms,* Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah.

Green, B. Hodgens, J & Luke, A 1997, Debating Literacy in Australia: History lessons and popular f(r)ctions. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy.* vol.20, no.1, pp.6-24

Gurria, A 2009, *Charting progress, building visions, improving life* Keynote speech OECD 3rd World Forum on Statistics, Knowledge and Policy, http://www.oecd.org/document/0,3746,en_21571361_44315115_43953021_1_1_1_1,00.html retrieved 22/08/2011

Hall, S 1996, The meaning of New Times. In Morley, D & Chen, K (eds) *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies,* Routledge, London.

Hamilton, M & Barton, D 2000, The International Adult Literacy Survey: What does it really measure? *International Review of Education,* vol 46, no.5, pp. 377-389.

Hamilton, M & Hillier, Y 2007, Deliberative policy analysis: adult literacy assessment and the politics of change, *Journal of Education Policy,* vol.22, no.5, pp573-594.

Hartley, R & and Horne, J 2006, *Social and economic benefits of improved adult literacy: Towards a better understanding,* NCVER, Adelaide.

Horton, M & Freire, P 1990, *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change,* Temple University Press, Philadelphia.

Industry Skills Council 2011, *No More Excuses,* ISC

Luke, A 2001, How to Make Policy Differently: Generational Change, Professionalisation, and Literate Futures, AATE/ALEA Joint National Conference, Hobart.

Luke, A 1999, Education 2010 and new times: Why equity and social justice still matter, but differently, Education Queensland online conference 20/10/99.

Lyotard, J F 1984, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge.* trans. Bennington, G & Massumi, B. Manchester University Press, Manchester.

Marginson, S 1992, *Economic Rationalism in Education,* Paper presented at the 'Rationalising Australia' Conference, Flinders University, South Australia.

New London Group, 1996, A pedagogy of multiliteracies: designing social futures, *Harvard Educational Review,* vol66, no1, pp.60-92.

Ryan, J S 1998, http://www.une.edu.au/publicity/newsrelease/november98/141-98.html retrieved 15/03/2011

Statistics Canada & OECD 2005, Learning a Living: First Results of the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey, OECD Publishing, Ottawa and Paris.

Street, B 1984, *Literacy in Theory and Practice,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Wicket, R 2002, Politics, activism and processes of policy production: Adult literacy in Australia, in Lo Bianco, J & Wickert, R (eds) *Australian Policy Activism in language and literacy,* Language Australia, Melbourne.

Wickert, R. & Mc Guirk, J 2005 *Integrated Literacies: Using partnerships to build literacy capability in communities*, NCVER, Adelaide.