

What can the past tell about preservation in the present climate?

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What messages can we glean from an understanding of the history of our field which will help us understand our present context and which will suggest strategies for preservation in the future? The fundamental question however is, preservation of what? What do we want to preserve? What did our field look like in the past, and what aspects of the field should and can we try to preserve?

I have been researching the history of adult basic education in NSW and although what I am going to say is based on NSW research, it is relevant to all states since the factors that influenced our development were the socio political factors that influenced the development of the field nationally, and in fact, internationally.

The history of our field really only extends over the past 40 years, but I will concentrate on just two eras: the genesis of the field – where that came from and what it looked like then, and the period of most radical change, in the late 80s and early 90s which set the stage for the context in which you are teaching today.

There were good aspects of past provision that have been hard to let go of. It would be good to be able to reclaim some of them and preserve them into the future. But they grew out of a different socio-political context. Your context is different now.

By way of justification or rationale for my choice of topic and the reason for my interest in the subject in the first place, I offer you this quote from a paper by Alison Lee & Rosie Wickert in 1994 who lamented that to date there had been no substantial history of the field written, so that

... teachers have few places to go to contextualise their own practice.... In order to intervene in and assume control of the future of their field, teachers must develop an understanding of the complexities and inconsistencies that constitute the field. (Lee & Wickert 2000, pp. 140 - 1)

We can all come up with ample quotes to remind us of the importance of understanding the past in order to understand the present.

But before I go on, I want to introduce you to Sue. Sue's story is one of a number of case histories of adult literacy (or adult basic education ...) students reported in the wonderful little book produced by the Victorian Council for Adult Literacy, called '*A Fuller Sense of Self*' – which was a quote from one of the students.

This is what Sue had to say about what improving her literacy and numeracy had meant to her:

When you find some success in learning you can be more open and involved in the community.

Suddenly I took note of what was going on. I had never voted before, up until five years ago which was precisely the time that I started coming to school. Learning gave me the confidence to want to vote and be interested in doing it.

Previously I used to avoid coming up the street to do my shopping. I'd always had this feeling that people might be looking through me and into me. I know with me, I'm a different person now. (Bowen 2011, p. 9)

Many of you will have had many Sues in your classes and will recognise hers as just one of the stories of personal transformation that our classes can be witness to. So let's just leave her sitting there as a witness to our story – and let *her* judge how the changes in provision that I am about to trace might have helped or hindered her development of a '*Fuller Sense of Self*'.

The genesis of the field in Australia

It took western countries such as Australia until the 1970s to 'discover' the 'illiteracy problem'.

It was not even a named field of publicly funded education until the 1970s. There had of course always been ad hoc classes run by church groups or community groups, but in the 1970s the western world discovered the 'illiteracy problem'.

So what happened in the 1970s? To understand the genesis of the field, we need to look to the socio-political and cultural climate of the time. The 1960s and early 70s ... the feminist movement ... gay rights movement ... black rights movement ... This was a period of general optimism and belief in a new world order which gave rise to worldwide liberation movements. Socially conscious and liberal minded middle class citizens began rallying around issues of human rights. From this sprang a general concern to increase access to higher education for working class and disadvantaged groups and concern for the rights of adults who could not read therefore found fertile ground.

The election of the Whitlam Labor government in Australia in 1972 provided a political response to this with the Whitlam reforms placing a new emphasis on social equality. The whole field of education was opened up to innovative ideas from abroad.

The Brazilian educator Paulo Freire was an important influence on the rhetoric and discourse that characterised the early field. In 1972 he visited Melbourne as a speaker at a World Council of Churches seminar. That seminar was attended by a number of the early innovators of the adult literacy movement in Australia and his ideas of literacy as emancipation became a central tenet of our discourse.

Against this background, two important government reports gave birth to our field. One was the Kangan report, *TAFE in Australia: Report on Needs in Technical and Further Education* (1974) which argued for a widening of the responsibilities of technical education to encompass further general education and a responsibility for inclusion of those who had in the past been excluded from education and training.

The other was the Richardson report which followed on from Kangan the next year and which stated:

An effective literacy programme will almost certainly have to be conducted outside the formal institutional framework. Adult Literacy should be regarded by TAFE as a major challenge. The committee urges state TAFE authorities to regard literacy programmes as a high priority in their use of Australian Government funds. (Richardson 1975, p. 96)

Most states, including my own, took up this challenge very seriously and within a very short time a large number of permanent positions were created in TAFE and continued to grow for many years.

Much of what I have to say now relates to TAFE – not because most of my professional history has been in TAFE, but because TAFE has been the major provider of adult basic education in NSW until the 1990s.

At the beginning the field was called Adult Literacy, which was the term used by UNESCO. UNESCO has always been an influential player in the development of the field in diverse ways, even in Australia. However, it soon came to be called Adult Basic Education in many states, or Adult Literacy & Basic Education, ALBE. This was a crucial development and one worth dwelling on for a bit.

So where did that name come from? As with much of the early provision, it came from Britain.

I want to quote now from a really important and extensive research project that was carried out in the UK to assess the impact of their adult literacy campaign: the brief was to assess the impact **on the students** and the report was called *The concept of success in adult literacy*. Amongst other really important findings which seem to have been forgotten over the years was this:

What the educational world has been calling literacy provision is often, in the perceptions of students, much more akin to what has been described as basic education.

Progress in reading and writing was the proximate means towards affective achievements in personal and social life, towards the assertion of self-in-society, and achievements in the literacy skills themselves, even in their application to material situations, came lower in order of importance.

Where success was most clearly felt, students were receiving a general basic education and were not simply in classes for the three Rs. (Charnley & Jones 1979, p. 184)

So in NSW TAFE we had a division of Adult Basic Education: we were teachers of Adult Basic Education and I think that students such as Sue probably felt that they had received a general *basic education*.

Education is such a lovely word. I think we are at risk of losing that word from our professional discourse.

In the late 1970s most of the states began their fledgling adult literacy programs with volunteer tutor programs.

The Richardson Report had advised that adult literacy provision should be conducted outside the formal institutional framework, and it was. This was very much the orthodoxy of the time.

Our volunteer tutor programs were modelled after those that had been developed in Britain, in an effort to remove the institutionalised contexts of the provision that was offered on the understanding that our students were fragile learners. Tutors and students met in either the student's or tutor's homes or somewhere like the local library.

This volunteer tutor provision was the mainstay of provision for many years, not because it was cheap, but because it was seen as appropriate to a large proportion of our client group.

However, quite soon after, small group class provision in TAFE colleges was added.

They were small classes with a student: teacher ratio of 6:1. This allowed for individualised tuition; each student had a program tailored to their own needs and interests. There was of course no accredited curricula – rather a teacher devised curriculum for each student. Assessment was negotiated between student and teacher. It was 'How's it Going?' type of self-assessment, which has not made its way into the New Public Management speak. It is not considered valid assessment.

Individualised tuition was really central to our principles of provision. As I have been trawling through old documents and research papers, I find that this principle of student centeredness is quoted as a guiding principle over and over.

This is a definition of student centredness which was articulated by a group of practitioners in 1983.

The individual student's perceptions, needs, aspirations and learning style should determine the type of tuition s/he receives, rather than any pre-conceived notions of ideal educational content and delivery. This includes respect for the student's right to share in decision-making about his/her educational future.

What does it mean to be a good adult basic education teacher? The literature relating to our field suggests that it means being responsive to the learner. Central to this is respect for learners' goals, and appreciating their achievements and progress in their own terms.

So the principles and ideas that shaped the early programs for maybe a decade included these:

- Student centred tuition
- Individualised programs
- Negotiated learning
- Humanist, liberal education
- Literacy learning as a tool for personal growth
- Emphasis on affective growth
- Emancipation
- Participatory education
- and in contemporary terms, it was a social context view of literacy

These were the professional discourses that drove the early development of provision.

The history of our field has generally been considered to occur in three or 4 x 10 year phases. The era that I have been describing has been described as '*at the margins: emerging from the ground up*'. We were certainly marginalised, and in many ways, that was the way we wanted it, because we argued that 'we were different – our students had special needs'. And for the most part, TAFE accommodated us in that.

For example, many of the early programs were accommodated off campus –often in the college's "Gumnut Cottage" – usually an unprepossessing cottage adjacent to the college which TAFE rented for us and which we often shared with the Aboriginal Education Unit and other access programs. And that was the way we liked it.

Our only accountability systems to our employer were our rolls and the enrolment forms which, we had managed to argue, needed only minimal information, in the interest of the student's anonymity. But that lack of accountability to anyone but the client could probably not last - and perhaps nor should it.

The next decade – Into the mainstream.

The decade of the mid 1980s to mid 1990s were described as "Into the mainstream: building a national infrastructure for growth". It has also been referred to as "Australia's literacy decade"... "Out of the billabong, into the mainstream". ((Wickert et al. 2007)

1991 had been declared by UNESCO as International Literacy Year and our government recognised that with increased funding for professional development, research, and resource development. That, along with other factors led to it being described as Australia's Literacy Decade. If there was a golden age of literacy, it was then.

The developments of subsequent decades built on the political and economic changes that happened in the 80s & 90s which I will try to outline now.

1991 may have been International Literacy Year – however, the global economy had already taken a downturn. This was articulated in Keating's 1986 'banana republic speech' which heralded a determination by the Hawke government to turn the economy around. Very quickly adult basic education became co-opted into the cause of improving national productivity.

This was the period of industry restructuring, and vocational training became integral to that, with an acknowledgement that development of L/N skills was going to be integral to the success of training. Adult literacy was seen as central to the training reform agenda whose purpose was seen as being to "efficiently and effectively service economic growth". (John Dawkins, Minister for Education, 1987)

At a meeting with adult literacy practitioners at the time, Laurie Carmichael, the president of the ACTU had this to say: "Your time has come. The door of history has opened for you. Award restructuring can't happen without you".

How seductive is that!

There was, at the time, a professional discussion about whether being drawn into the mainstream and being integrated with vocational education and training (VET) was a good move. There were those who argued that this should be resisted – but there probably was no option. Adult Basic Education was carried along in the tsunami of global microeconomic reform. We became part of the VET story. We were moved out of our "Gumnut" cottages and onto campus. And volunteer tutor programs began to be phased out. In NSW there are probably no TAFE volunteer programs run now.

Post-compulsory education was now re-aligned to reflect the needs of industry. Industry skills councils assumed the job of guiding development of training packages, rather than curricula being developed by educators.

The discourse which surrounded adult literacy or basic education became one of human capital. From an adult literacy perspective, human capital can be viewed as the 'notion in which workers are vehicles for the economic progress of the nation' (Hartley & Horne 2006, p. 7)

For many years the discourse that included ideals of liberal education – Sue's basic education – existed side by side with the human capital argument, but increasingly it has been sidelined and many in the field feel that it is at risk of being lost entirely; that in 2015 the Sues of our state who want to get a general basic education, will have trouble

finding a program. Under NSW's new *Smart and Skilled* policy, TAFE and ACE have a contract to run some Foundation Skills programs which are not necessarily tied to employment outcomes. But which institutes will take that up – how many classes will run and how will Sue know about them?

Students such as Sue don't easily find their way around the promotional information such as *Smart and Skilled* and TAFE offer. Which is why it was part of the responsibility of Adult Literacy Officers, those early coordinators of volunteer tutor programs, to develop a network of community contacts, to put up posters in medical health centres, put notices in school newsletters and invite journalists to take an interest in our stories.

As I visit ABE classes around the city, I notice there are not many second chance learners; learners who had some sort of schooling in Australia. That doesn't mean they aren't there anymore. It just means they haven't found their way to our classes because it is no longer anyone's job to operate in any but the world of corporate education in dissemination of information about our courses.

The commonwealth government continues to commit ever increasing levels of funding, but it is reserved, through the SEE program, to the unemployed. Literacy is seen as a work-related issue. The discourse around the urgent need for literacy provision is always around the nation's productivity, very rarely around the personal and social needs of citizens such as Sue.

Our media consistently reminds us of the need to improve the nation's foundation skills in the interest of increasing the nation's productivity. The Australian Industry Group's report 'When Words Fail' had this to say:

The often quoted OECD study states that increasing the literacy level of a country by 1% leads to a 2.5% rise in labour productivity and a 1.5% increase in GDP per head. The Productivity Commission has estimated, taking into account a range of variables, that increases in literacy and numeracy could increase total labour productivity by 1.2%.

We can question the validity of the definitive use of numbers such as this (and those interested in the ways numbers are used have done so) but of course, it is the role of the Australian Industry Group responsible for the report, to proselytise the human capital discourse. As professional teachers of adult basic education we have a responsibility to interrogate that discourse and to promote another discourse, not necessarily antithetical to the human capital discourse, but parallel to it. It is a discourse that includes the word education.

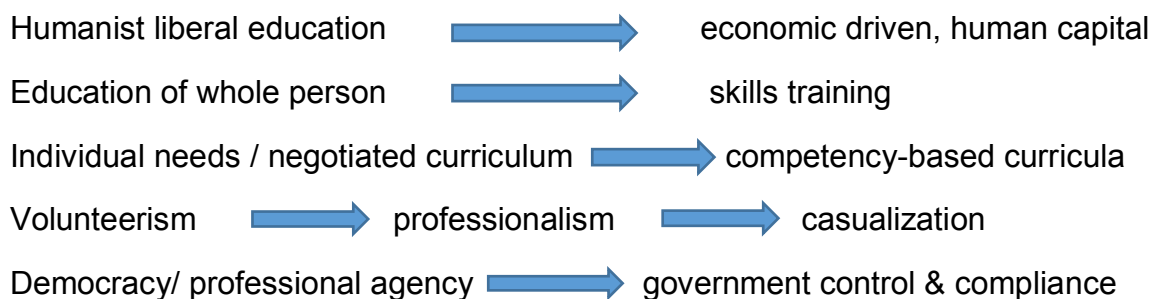
This is not to suggest that getting a job is not a really important goal for many of our students, but the world of work is just one of the domains in which we exercise our literacy and numeracy skills. We are more than just our jobs.

There *is*, of course, a body of evidence that links an individual's and a community's levels of literacy and numeracy to its economic prosperity.

However, there is also a body of evidence to demonstrate that it is not a simplistic causal relationship. It doesn't follow that if you send someone to a class to teach them some work related literacy and numeracy skills, they will get a job in the new knowledge economy, our GDP will improve ... and we can all afford to buy a bigger TV.

For example, Steven Reder's (2013) extensive longitudinal study in USA has shown that one of the factors is the student's engagement with literacy and numeracy activity which, over time, has an effect. So Sue's interest in reading the paper every day leads to a gain in the skills and may in time, lead her to think, 'well, I could maybe do a course and get a job'.

In tracing the development of the field, these have been the general themes of change or development over these 40 years that I see as evident.



In 1997 this is what Jo LoBianco had to say about our profession.

"[Provision], although greater, is:

- *fragmented and insecure,*
- *the workforce has become increasingly casualised,*
- *professional networks have been damaged by competitive tendering processes,*
- *infrastructure support has dematerialised,*
- *working conditions have worsened,*
- *curriculum has been "colonised" by competency-based approaches*
- *and in the eyes of many, adult literacy has come to be "sublimated to a centralised, controlling, assessing, monitoring, information-demanding mechanism". (Lo Bianco 1997)*

For those of you who don't know the name, LoBianco is no radical anarchist, but the respected author of the original and influential commonwealth government's Policy on Languages in 1987.

He writes about the burden which teachers are having to manage with issues of compliance. Compliance is not just an issue with the workload – but with a conflict of discourses about what matters – doing the paperwork and being faithful to the curriculum or responding to students' needs. Practitioners sense that what matters to them and to their learners has been marginalised.

What I have tried to outline here points to the fact that many of these issues that we are grappling with are not simply inexplicable outcomes of a misguided policy process or the fault of individual personalities or of one organisation or minister for education. They are enduring tensions that have to be managed. At meeting such as this in the UK, in USA and Canada, they will be discussing the very same issues. No matter what level of the managerial food chain we find ourselves on, we are all victims of these influences.

On a 4 Corners program about The Salvation Army on the ABC last year, the past CEO of the Salvation Army's employment arm, Mission Australia, was commenting on the situation whereby a social welfare organisation such as the Salvation Army has found itself as an employment agency for the government, and as such having to do its bidding. She made this wonderful analogy to the new buzz word, mission creep or mission drift.

... mission drift occurs when your goals and purposes become corrupted and confused with the mission and goals of government so you lose sight of why you were involved in the first place and you start to take on the ideology, the goals, the mission of government."

Wilma Gallet – former CEO Employment Plus¹

That statement could just as well have been made by people in our field, and I am drawn to it for two reasons; firstly, I like the metaphor of mission drift, and I wish I had thought of it. Secondly, it demonstrates so well that our history in many respects reflects the history of very many social justice programs since we have all been influenced by the same global socio political influences in our journey to the new capitalism or the neo-liberal economy.

What must we try to re-claim from the past?

The messages then that I draw from a consideration of the history of our field are these:

- We need to reclaim that initial body of firmly held beliefs, specially
 - student-centredness
 - education of the whole person
- We need to reclaim the word and the concept of *education*. We are more than just trainers of foundation skills
- We need to reclaim education's moral purpose. To do this in the neo-liberal economy, we may need to work in the small spaces, or in Mary Hamilton's words, to employ 'artful pragmatism'.

¹ Compass - The Salvos: Part 2 14 September 2014 <http://www.abc.net.au/compass/s4071670.htm>

- And what about Sue? We need to preserve programs for second chance learners that are not necessarily work related. To do this, we need to reclaim some diversity in the field; diversity of provision types and funding sources so that provision is not subject to the vicissitudes of the VET field.

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