

Literacy and lifelong learning: social justice for all?

In Sydney recently, 80 participants attended an ACAL forum, *Literacy and lifelong learning: social justice for all?* Lifelong learning has emerged as part of the rhetoric around reform in education and training in Australia and overseas. The forum aimed to examine questions about who is promoting lifelong learning, why it is being promoted, who is learning, who is paying and who may be missing out.

The format chosen for the day involved a keynote speaker, followed by a panel discussion, then opportunities for participants to discuss issues raised by the speakers in round table discussions, with each group focussing on a different aspect of lifelong learning. ACAL noted themes that emerged from the day and is considering them in relation to future action in this area.

A summary of each session appears on page 10 of this issue of *Literacy Link*. The keynote address by Chris Sidoti is available in full on the ACAL web site—www.acal.edu.au/SidotiPpr.pdf



Keynote speaker Chris Sidoti, former Australian Human Rights Commissioner, with ACAL President, Dr Geraldine Castleton

The ACAL National Conference is being held 1—3 November on the Gold Coast in Queensland. To obtain a registration form contact Dick Roebuck phone (07) 3875 5862, fax (07) 3875 6868, email r.roebuck@mailbox.gu.edu.au Conference details are posted on web site—<http://cwpp.slq.qld.gov.au/qcal/arch/2001-odyssey.htm>

Rosemary Wood's article (page 2) encapsulates many of the dilemmas facing our profession as she reflects on the complexities and contradictions inherent in developing assessment exemplars to be used to carry out pre-training assessment for DETYA-funded literacy and numeracy training (LANT) programs.

On the face of it, the articles in this issue describing literacy practice in Africa offer some practical contrasts to Rosemary Wood's; a closer reading reveals that literacy practitioners everywhere have much in common, especially as regards what motivates them and also the complexity of the obstacles they have to surmount. This helps put the difficulties we face here into perspective. All three countries can benefit by learning from each other.

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Creating numeracy assessment materials to match *National Reporting System indicators of competence*

by Rosemary Wood

This reflection paper complements a package of exemplars developed to be used in pre-training assessment for DETYA-funded literacy and numeracy training (LANT) programs. The package provides National Reporting System (NRS) indicators of competence for numeracy from levels one to four.

From July to December 2000, a group of South Australian literacy practitioners worked together to devise a set of numeracy assessment materials to be used in pre-training assessments for literacy and numeracy training (LANT) programs funded by the Department of Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA).

LANT programs are available to eligible adult literacy learners who are in receipt of a government benefit or are registered job seekers. Learner eligibility is determined by Centrelink. Contracts for a new round of literacy and numeracy provision will be available for tender between July and December 2001.

Literacy educators in LANT programs must conduct summative pre-training assessments in the areas of reading, writing, numeracy, oral communication skills, and learning strategies. They must also provide post-training assessments. The final 20% of payment to providers is contingent upon measurable learner progress.

No set procedures or materials are provided for the assessment of literacy levels. Materials and methods used by providers must conform to national standards, as outlined in the National Reporting System (NRS).

The NRS was created to provide a tool for national moderation of literacy courses. It was

intended to provide organising principles for curriculum and descriptors for reporting achievement. It has been brought into use currently as a tool for national moderation of literacy assessments. This use does not simply mean that the assessment tools are rated against the NRS. Rather, each individual who undertakes an assessment in the LANT program is given an NRS rating. Consequently, the NRS is now being used to grade literacy learners. Thus, a tool that was designed for moderation of course standards is now being used to grade the skills of individuals. It is like using a garden hose to water the pot plants. It can be done, but it requires sensitive adjustment.

In order to maintain a moderated standard, DETYA randomly nominates specific pre- or post-training assessments that must be submitted by a provider to Verification Australia (a private company that successfully tendered to do this on behalf of DETYA) for validation. A detailed report on the assessment materials, methods, and reporting is returned to the provider who, in the spirit of continuous improvement, may respond with a plan for improvement where necessary.

At a moderation workshop conducted by Linda Wyse & Associates in Melbourne in June 2000, in response to critical feedback about their assessments, a number of practitioners

Grading is something literacy practitioners have previously rejected. What will be the effect of grading literacy learners—on the learners themselves and on literacy practice?

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requested a set of exemplars on which to model future assessments. It was stated that such exemplars were unavailable and that it was not the role of Verification Australia to provide them.

It was in this setting that the South Australian practitioners decided to share the challenging and complex task of developing a set of numeracy assessment materials for use in the LANT programs to be designed to demonstrate NRS *indicators of competence* for numeracy from levels one to four. This paper is an informal report that reflects on the process of that work.

Several shared concerns brought the group together. First, we had all received critical feedback from Verification Australia about the assessment tools that we were using and the validity of NRS levels attributed by us to LANT applicants. For us, the numeracy assessment tasks and levels were most frequently queried. This common concern explains why we decided to focus on numeracy exemplars.

Second, we felt overwhelmed by the complexity of assessment tasks needed to demonstrate NRS *indicators of competence* to the standard required by Verification Australia on behalf of DETYA. Third, we were not sufficiently familiar with the NRS to evaluate our own assessment tools confidently and independently.

Finally, we needed more economical assessment tools to reduce the time involved in the assessment process. We found our methods of assessment to be excessively time-consuming, especially as our programs were only paid to provide 1.5 hours of assessment per learner, including pre-training and post-training assessments, recording, and reporting.

Reflections

In the field of literacy education, assessment and evaluation has usually been achieved as an integral part of the literacy learning. Even in initial interviews, skills assessment was woven into a nurturing meeting that was regarded by the interviewer (assessor) as the first learning opportunity. The learner would be encouraged to articulate his or her literacy/numeracy needs and to begin to set learning goals. An atmosphere of success was always the object of this interview: the interviewer might emphasise what the learner could already do, the groundwork she or he had already achieved, and ways to build on those achievements, as well as a positive outlook on working together towards learner-centred goals.

The detailed grading and measurement of a

learner's progress, which is expected of us now under the DETYA contract, often seems to be contrary to what we see as good practice in literacy education. For example, in order to prove the applicant's entry or exit level, assessors are required to persist until they can demonstrate the point at which an applicant can no longer succeed. This means that we have to ask applicants to do harder and harder tasks until they fail. This is very hard for us to do, as we believe it is contrary to good educational practice. To push new learners to attempt more and more challenging tasks until they can no longer succeed goes completely against our profession's commitment to a culture of building upon success.



'There is the dilemma of the assessor's intuitive professional judgement versus the appearance of the NRS being definitive.'

In the current climate, rigorous assessment requirements create major time constraints. Initial interviews were formerly a kind of 'consciousness-raising' about learners' existing literacy skills; goal-setting for future learning is now pushed aside due to the necessity of providing 'verifiable' detailed information about every indicator of competence in the NRS. The NRS was originally developed to assess the levels of whole courses rather than those in an initial one-hour assessment. It seems that no provider could have possibly estimated the time-consuming nature of these assessments when they accepted a contract allowing only 1.5 hours for pre- and post-training assessments, administration, reporting, and responding to verifications.

The NRS is very complex, which also creates time challenges. For practitioners

to learn to find their way around it with any kind of confidence demands a major investment of their time.

Yet, when we invested the time as a group, we found that that which appears to be detailed is sometimes vague or ambiguous. Meaning in the NRS is definitely open to interpretation. Use of the NRS to allocate literacy and numeracy standards to assessment materials could be seen as an experiment in subjective interpretation rather than the objective procedure that we have been led to believe by the rigorous reporting and moderation processes that are in place and

The assesseees don't fit into the boxes. I did a writing assessment yesterday and the guy used paragraphs really well but there's no way he was a three. He only used very simple language and he only used one conjunction.

which are based upon the NRS-processes on which a literacy program's future funding may stand or fall.

The validation or 'verification' of assessment has become an external pressure which, we believe, all LANT assessors and educators must feel acutely. The contract has so many restrictions and timelines that, for some providers, there is a fearful atmosphere. So much depends on getting it 'right', an approach that seems to be extraneous to the actual educational efforts of providers and learners. Professional judgments about learners' needs must still be made, and decisions about methodologies and materials remain, as before, a major concern of educators. But over it all—over the already complex and time-consuming business of literacy teaching and learning—there is now an additional layer of confusion and constraint.

In addition to the 'verification' or validation of our documentation pertaining to our assessments, the evaluation of our evidence for literacy/numeracy levels attributed by us to students rests with an external authority, namely Verification Australia. The moderation of standards, which has previously been a collective professional responsibility, is now also provided by this external authority.

It is not surprising that the literacy field has been quite slow to question the culture of 'obedience' to the authority of the verifiers, or to challenge the appropriateness of the current use of the NRS. At the introduction of the system, there was no time to consider these things. Then, we were all too frantically busy trying to comply with this new system in addition to what we had already been doing. Now we are on 'automatic pilot' with all our time taken up trying to manage the workload. So a culture of 'obedience' has ambushed us.

It was not until we actually got together as a group of colleagues to work on this package of numeracy assessment materials that we began collectively to get some perspective on the situation. We heard ourselves asking each other what 'they' wanted over and over again, until it finally occurred us that we should also consider telling 'them'—the external verifiers of Verification Australia—when we thought they were wrong and we should be checking with each other about the feedback we were getting.

The staff of Verification Australia have been approachable and willing to spend time in discussion, but we have nevertheless invested them with undue authority, rather than treating

them as colleagues under contract to DETYA as we are ourselves. A relationship that we have viewed hierarchically, with ourselves at the bottom, is actually a potential avenue of liaison between DETYA and providers.

Verification Australia could improve the situation by a proactive effort to refuse this excessive investment of authority and responsibility attributed to them by literacy practitioners floundering under the new system. As literacy professionals themselves, the verifiers are probably in an excellent position to perceive what has happened and to lead a change in culture. No matter how difficult and time-consuming the task, we believe

that the time is ripe for practitioners to take on more responsibility for decisions about interpreting the NRS and about the validity of the whole assessment process.

Unfortunately, the other factor contributing to our submissive posture is the competition between providers. This competition means that colleagues in the literacy field are less likely than before to actually share information and insights.

In this paper, I have reflected on the process of developing a set of numeracy exemplars to match NRS *indicators of competence*. We have tried to create a useful package of assessment materials that will not compromise our professional values and which will be acceptable to the verifiers. We believe that the package will match the indicators of the NRS and will reduce the workload in the initial interview, so that there is more time for the important stuff of learning. We hope that this material will be of use to other assessors and we encourage them to use it freely and in the spirit of good practice.

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Arrangements concerning availability of the package were not finalised at the time of printing. *Literacy Link* hopes to include this information in the next issue.



APOLOGY The article which appeared in February issue of *Literacy Link*, 'Guidelines for employing volunteer literacy tutors', was attributed to the wrong person—Ana Sangiau is the correct author of the article.

TEACH THE MOTHER, REACH THE CHILD—an intergenerational approach to breaking the cycle of illiteracy among women and girls in the Ijebu district of Nigeria.

by Dr. Abeke Adesanya

The home is the child's first school and the parents are the child's first teachers. The attitudes of parents convey a critical message to their children about schooling, the work and joy of learning, and the connection between education and quality of life. The link between under-educated parents and the potential failure of their children in school is well documented

In Nigeria, the majority of the women are not only illiterates, they are also poor, with an estimated 62 per cent of the adult female population illiterate as compared to 38 per cent of the adult male population (UNESCO, 1995:16). Precisely, Ogun State, one of the states carved out of the defunct Western Region which pioneered the universal free primary education (UPE) program in 1955, still records between 53 per cent and 61 per cent illiteracy for men and women. Many girls did not go to school because of traditional cultural patterns and social behaviours, the allocation of family responsibilities to the sexes, and poverty.

Within this context, the education of the rural illiterate women in Ijebu (Nigeria) becomes a prerequisite for promoting and sustaining their girls' education. These girls are likely to develop and sustain interest in education if their mothers encourage them. Their mothers' education should therefore be encouraged, and in a natural manner. If this could be done a great barrier to girls' education would have been removed, and the goal of education for all would have been given a boost. The intergenerational education for women and girls (IGEWOG) in Ijebu district of Ogun State, Nigeria, was conceived within this perspective.

IGEWOG aims at removing the barriers to girls' education in its totality, focusing on the acquisition of basic literacy and numeracy skills, problem solving, health and child care, hygiene and nutrition for their personal development and breaking the cycle of illiteracy in the target communities. In specific terms, IGEWOG set out to achieve the following objectives:

- To increase the current literacy profile for women and girls in the target Ijebu rural communities.
- To meet the basic educational and learning needs of women,—development of aptitudes and practical skills—guided by baseline data.
- To evolve sustainable strategies for breaking the cycle of illiterate mothers raising illiterate children through the inter-generational

education approach.

Expected Outcomes

At the end of the project, participating women were expected to be able to:

- Read and write in their mother tongue.
- Identify and embark on any trade of their choice available within the locality.
- Establish small backyard gardens where possible.
- Practise simple childcare procedures.
- Assert their fundamental human rights as stipulated in the Nigerian constitution.
- Take steps towards protecting their environment.
- Register with cooperative societies in their community and initiate steps towards obtaining facilities.
- Positively affect some harmful cultural beliefs and practices that constitute impediments to female education and women's development.

Programs of economic empowerment are combined with basic literacy activities. In all the literacy centres, the programs are actively in progress with the exemption of the Ajebandele centre where the government program has recently witnessed some serious setbacks bordering on low enrollment. The following project activities have been successfully carried out in the three promising centres.

Literacy Program—All the learners can now read the Yoruba alphabets fluently and the combination of letters to form words. In Mamu where the program first started, some participants have started reading the local Yoruba news magazine—*Alaroye*—though not fluently but sensibly. One can see the joy on the faces of these women as they feel that they can participate in written dialogue. The teacher asks a question on political issues and it is interesting to note that women who would not have anything to contribute to such issues now say that they heard the news and read in the papers.

A number of economic activities have been introduced at the literacy centres as a strategy for ensuring continuity and empowerment of the women.

Zobo drink preparation

In all the three centres, the local zobo drink has been introduced and taught. The learners were treated to chilled zobo drink, a drink associated with the elite especially at social gatherings. They all enjoyed the drink for about three consecutive learning sessions. When they were

told that they would be taught how to make it, they were all very happy. The condition attached to its being taught was that they should be able to document all that they would be taught. They made a pledge and the enthusiasm was quite palpable. A resource person (a caterer) was invited to teach in all the centres. The teaching took place at different times during the learning sessions in May, 2001. Zobo is a drink commonly associated with the Hausas of the Northern part of Nigeria, but the ingredients are also available in the Southern part here. The ingredients for making zobo drink are as follows:

- Zobo—red flowers leaves,
- Poroporo—dried guinea corn stalk,
- Ginger,
- Pineapple rind (for flavour; this could be mango, grape juice or any fruit to taste),
- Iyere—a Yoruba spice, and sugar or honey.



Literacy participants germinating sprouted palm kernels

The caterer brought the local measure called congo to indicate the level of zobo, and water. All the ingredients were washed and boiled. It was a participatory activity. The measuring and cooking were done in all the centres, so as to show correct procedure. Thereafter the economic, social and health advantages of zobo were discussed in the class.

Health advantages—the flower leaves and ginger are good for suppressing high blood pressure, especially in adults. The flower leaves are also used as vegetables in various local dishes. As a matter of fact, the green zobo is a delicacy in preparing melon (egusi) soup in Yorubaland. The dried guinea corn stalk, that is, poroporo, aids in increasing the quantity of blood in the system and the pineapple rind is a useful herb for curbing malaria fever.

Social advantage—It did not take us long to realise the social advantage as one of the learners put to bed at Igbaga two days after the zobo lesson. The learners were quick at displaying their knowledge. A large proportion of the drinks served that day was zobo. The whole

community was happy. That is a drink that mothers can use as a treat to the family members thus keeping her children happy at home.

Economic Advantages: Zobo drink when chilled serves as any bottled drinks. It is acceptable by children and adults; and particularly by adults who are conscious of the health effects of taking concentrated sugar in bottled drinks such as Coca-Cola. Furthermore, with just about five dollars equivalent of the Naira (Nigerian currency), a woman can start the business of zobo drink especially in the hot weather.

Training—oil palm nursery

Another major program carried out is the nursing of oil palm trees. Ijebu land generally used to be known for its oil palm business, but because of the crude oil boom era of Nigeria some years back, most of these natural business became subsumed.

The reason for the choice of palm tree nursery is the numerous cash products and job opportunities that can be found in engaging in its processing. It is from the palm fruit that oil, which is a major sauce ingredient, is derived. It is also used as part of the ingredients for making soap. The kernel is an export commodity and this will in future create avenue for external market. Brooms for sweeping and baskets for carrying farm products are gotten from the palm leaves. The residue from the oil is another good source of making fire for cooking. Palm wine is obtained also from the palm tree. Despite all the good things about this tree, especially the economic gains, the trees are almost becoming scarce thus reducing the source of cash income to the people engaged in its numerous business opportunities, especially the women and children.

Already germinated, nursed, palm kernels were purchased from the Nigerian Institute For Oil Research (NIFOR), Benin City, Edo State of Nigeria. This was done for a number of reasons. First, it was meant to sensitise the learners to several economic advantages associated with the oil palm ventures. Also, it was to provide a model for measuring the success of the literacy participants' own activities. Lastly, it was to ensure that the learners would have something to fall back upon when financial support through the project would no longer be forthcoming.

As noted earlier, the soil is suitable for the germination of oil palm trees. But looking around, most of the palm trees are old and the fruits are not much any longer. For this reason, palm oil is becoming a scarce commodity and the job of the women as palm oil producers is dwindling. So our venture into the reactivating the palm oil

production is about economic and social empowerment. The nursing of palm seedlings is an extension of the natural activity of women as 'nurturers'. To say that women and nature are intimately associated is perhaps saying the obvious. Furthermore, the business of raising palm seedlings is lucrative and does not exert much labour and energy.

The research team, two learners from each centre together with an official from the Agro Services Department of the Ministry of Agriculture, IjebuOde, Ogun State of Nigeria, had training on the Oil Palm Nursery Establishment and Maintenance Techniques. This served as a 'train the trainer' course.

The training program had both theoretical and practical components. The first part was mainly for theoretical discussion while the second was devoted to practical demonstration. Under oil palm nursery establishment, specific operations illustrated include:

- clearing/burning,
- stumping and leveling,
- ploughing and leveling,
- filling of planting bags,
- spraying of herbicides, and planting of sprouted seeds.

As for the maintenance of the oil palm nursery, specific operations demonstrated are:

- watering,
- fertilizer application,
- pest and disease control,
- pruning/cutting, and
- weed control.

The team went back to share their experiences in the above respects at the literacy centres. In all the three communities where this activity was carried out between April and May 2001, it had a success story all through. All the kernels sprouted. The already germinated ones bought from Benin served the purpose of advertisement. Already bookings are coming for their purchase.

Launching a business venture

A business venture has been introduced in Mamu community which appears to be the most vibrant of the literacy centres. Mamu learners bought fifty white chairs for rental purposes. Chair rental is a booming business in Ijebu District, and it is not energy sapping.

The launch was ceremoniously performed on Thursday, 31st of May, 2001. The learners who have constituted themselves into the 'Egbe Imole' (translating into the Enlightened Group) were very excited. Invitations to members of the community were hand written by the learners with the assistance of their teacher. This was

deliberate. Adult education is for immediate utility. In addition to other drinks, zobo drink was made prominent. It was chilled and served to all present with the emphasis on the fact that the drink was locally brewed. Prominent personalities of Mamu responded to the invitation and speeches were made.



In three to six months the palm seedlings will be ready for sale at almost double the price of the initial cost.

As for the women, they were very happy as some of them displayed their reading skills at the ceremony. For example, the Ogun State (Nigeria) anthem was sung from the chalkboard.

The introduction of the economic empowerment activities has introduced a new dimension to the intervention efforts. Learners now voluntarily attend classes and there has been a boost to new entrants who are coming to join the classes almost on daily basis.

Finally, we must not fail to reiterate the fact that adult literacy programs must be flexible to cater for several unforeseen developments. For example, it was difficult for the project team to operate a strict timetable of activities because the target people have their own 'calendar' (e.g. farming season, local festivals, etc.) which cannot be compromised for any other 'external' programs. Hence this project was made flexible to accommodate local circumstances from time to time. In fact, it could be stated that most of the previous government's efforts in introducing sustainable literacy program may have failed on account of failure to take full account of local realities. We shall assess the effectiveness of our innovative approach in the next phase of this project as deemed necessary.

A complete version of this paper, including references, is available on the ACAL web site—www.acal.edu.au

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A simple definition of 'safe text' refers to its purpose: to avoid unwanted outcomes of communication. The risk of such 'accidents' is especially high when crossing cultures. PhD researcher Rita Pasqualini shares her findings on some of the pitfalls that can face literacy practitioners in their dealings with students.

Confusion, offence or embarrassment may easily arise in adult literacy tutoring, as we often deal with words detached from a specific and shared context.¹

There is usually a chain of causes and effects leading to 'problems': in general terms, these difficulties in interaction appear related to differences in linguistic expression. The latter are often linked to people's 'background' languages, including varieties of English, which may be different even within a family. This is amply and amusingly demonstrated in the 'Mere Male' column of a women's magazine, used as one of the sources for ongoing research. The companion column, 'Children's World', reminds us of the important process of language acquisition: learners of all ages attempt to 'make sense' of the new language, often with creative linguistic outcomes, as already noted by Freud almost a century ago.²

In the international arena, 'Travellers Tales' by Nury Vittachi are available on the web site of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* (<http://www.feer.com/>) and highlight the problems of 'English as a global language'.³ An example (www.feer.com/0107_19/p058tales.html) shows how English may be used in a post-colonial context, and how people may react to such a text.

There's good advice everywhere in India. Reader Reinhard Hoenighaus saw this sign at the train station in Varanasi. The odd thing is that it was on the window of the waiting room. The other odd thing is that he had to wait nine hours for his train. The sign, reproduced in a photograph, reads 'Please do not waste time':

the message may appear puzzling at best, but one possible reading of it would be the equivalent of 'do not loiter'. An approximate translation may be involved here:

such translations can be the source of 'unsafe' text, as illustrated in some (real or supposed) instructions for use. Those for a Swedish chainsaw apparently warn users not to attempt to stop the chainsaw 'with their hands or genitals'. The latter word may have meant 'limbs' in the original (*extremiteter*), but in English it leaves out the lower extremities. The risk is that some users may put their foot in it, in every sense.

So, how can tutors avoid putting their foot in it, when communicating with students who may have very different language backgrounds and background languages?

First of all, relax: nobody is perfect, and anyone can be correct/ed.⁴ In other words, students cannot expect us to make absolutely no mistakes: they can, on the other hand, explain why their expressions may be different from yours, as may be their opinions on whether and why something is 'right', 'correct', 'logical', polite, appropriate, etc. Both sides are likely to learn about cross-cultural communication, particularly in a tutorial relationship that focuses on language use. Each side can also learn by and from oneself: if you can 'hear yourself think' about linguistic expressions, you can probably notice how you feel, what you do or not, what you mean or understand, and why. In other terms, there are *affective*, *behavioural* and *cognitive* factors: this is one important meaning of 'ABC', proposed as a mnemonic in this article about safe text.

Confusion on 'matters of fact' tends to be *cognitive*: what time is half-six? What do you pack for a New Year trip if the average temperature is in the thirties? Even NASA tripped up

1 An experienced practitioner, who speaks with a Scottish accent, provided a clear example: when asked about the possible meanings of peace / piece, the 'foreign' student replied 'going to the bathroom' (or a similarly polite reference to p*ss). If the literacy learner had been a local lad or lass, would they have mentioned alcoholic drinks?

2 *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, also translated as 'Wit...' from the German 'Witz', dates back to 1905; it includes many examples of word play, as does *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (PEL), first published in 1901. Subsequent editions and translations of PEL have

added many instances of 'Freudian slips', with fascinating explanations of their possible causes and effects.

3 That is the title of the book by David Crystal (1997), which includes chapters on 'New Englishes' and 'Will English fragment?'. Like many linguists working in and on English, David Crystal is Welsh.

4 Could you tell that this was first said in Italian? 'Nessuno è perfetto, ma ognuno può essere corretto' loses some of its impact in translation, like many sayings, proverbs, idioms, slogans, jokes, etc.

on this when the Mars probe had the wrong unit to measure distances.

Behaviour is linked to 'matters of manners', culture and conventions: when asked to 'come for tea and bring a plate', people may have a range of different expectations. Newcomers have been known to bring empty plates, but an Australian went with an empty stomach to see a country cousin, expecting 'tea' at the given time to be the evening meal—too late!

Affective reactions are linked to deep-seated needs for 'meaning', recognition and (self-)esteem: while blunders on factual matters also lead to embarrassment, the emotional consequences can be worse in cases of inadvertent offence. A very common arena for unsafe text leads to the advice to use 'proper names and correct address': how we are called is an important part of our identity.

There cannot be any guarantees of a perfectly and universally safe text, although big companies carefully choose their brand names to avoid 'unsafe' associations in some languages. There cannot be a perfectly sterile operating room, I read somewhere, but this does not mean that we might as well do surgery in a sewer. The parallel with text is obvious: depending on how delicate is the 'operation' being performed, suitable levels of safety are required, involving appropriate measures. In general terms, the Australian phrase 'no

worries' may be adjusted to 'few well-chosen worries'. That is the object of the research project, which has a narrow focus on written text in trans-cultural computer-mediated communication, but findings can apply far more widely.

To limit the risks of serious (or even ridiculous) outcomes, one needs to always be careful, no

matter how good one may be: there is little or no control over how the other side will produce, perceive or process text. On the other hand, awareness of background and culture helps recognise risky text before,

during or after misunderstandings. An open mind can acquire such awareness, and recognise that what appears 'wrong' may have been misunderstood, or derived from an 'honest' mistake rather than negative intentions. People who use more than one language tend to develop such skills from an early age, but it is never too late to learn, and it can be amusing.

The PhD project 'Searching for safe text' is continuing at Murdoch University. The concerns of adult literacy tutors and other practitioners may differ from those of language professionals (translators and interpreters) or those of tertiary educators. If you have views or queries, please get in touch.

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ACAL forum—Literacy and lifelong learning: social justice for all?

by Pat Hazell

The keynote address at the recent ACAL forum held in Sydney, *Literacy and lifelong learning: social justice for all?* was delivered by Chris Sidoti. He introduced his address by highlighting some data about Australians' literacy skills from the Australian Bureau of Statistics' *Aspects of Literacy Report*. He noted the high numbers of Australians with poor literacy skills in particular groups of our society, including those of indigenous Australians, non-English speaking background and those in remote communities.

He then set human rights and social justice issues within this picture. He explained that human rights are legal entitlements. Education is a human right, which enables people to function in a social setting, and gives rise to government's high ranking obligations to life-long education. Chris set out five criteria for education. It must be:

- Available
- Accessible
- Affordable
- Acceptable
- Adaptable

He noted that social justice is harder to define, but did so by quoting Mick Dodson, saying it 'must always be from the perspective of the grounded lives of people', and here Chris included people with literacy learning needs. In particular he drew attention to the following issues, and the need:

- for a national education strategy to ensure education, including literacy, for all
- to raise awareness that the cost of not educating is greater than the cost of education
- for information within the general community about literacy learning needs
- to show where educational responsibilities lie
- for a more coordinated approach—integrate literacy and human rights issues
- to look for ways to achieve advocacy
- for a national enquiry into rights for adult education
- to look at the nature of curriculum to include opportunities for learning to be critical and for learners to build evaluative skills.

Discussion followed Chris's address, around the following points.

- People are their own best advocates—our job is to equip them for this.
- Training agreements reveal that governments strive to restrict critical evaluation of their education agendas and financial priorities.
- As educators we are not currently defending our own cause. We need to be influencing educational policy.

Panel discussion

The aim of the panel session was to examine the topic through different perspectives, and each speaker spoke for 15 minutes, with question time at the end of the session. Speakers were:

- Tony Brown. Executive Director of Adult Learning Australia. Tony has worked in the area of adult learning environments, including the VET area.
- Darryl Dymock. Currently at Flinders University, Centre for Lifelong Learning, previously of the University of New England, where he had researched Adult Education, with a particular interest in the history of Adult Literacy education.
- Barbara Bee. A long-time advocate for adult literacy learning, carrying a strong social justice agenda through her work. Currently teaching in TAFE NSW and prisons.
- Rosie Wickert. Long history of advocacy and research in the field of adult literacy, and played a leading political role in adult literacy issues during the late 1980s and 1990s. Was head of Language and Literacy in the Faculty of Education at UTS for many years.

Summaries of presentations

Tony Brown looked at some contested notions of lifelong learning—as a 'sentence' for life, as a panacea or as a cure-all for society's problems. However, lifelong learning is being supported by an increasing number of bodies and associations. More Australians accept the practice of daily learning and contributing to Australia as a learning society.

He suggested people's identity is becoming less strongly linked to their work—we increasingly have other lives. He talked about the need for people to keep learning to keep up, and used the term 'learning divide', which he suggests is magnified as lives progress. He noted a lack of policy around community based education, with no support for unaccredited education.

Darryl Dymock said many Australians live their lives in anticipation of having to demonstrate their (lack of) literacy skills. He said that lifelong learning is not a passing fad, but has little relevance to people in lower socio-economic groups. It is a cradle-to-grave process involving continuous development. In the 1990s lifelong learning was almost entirely described in Australia in terms of vocational training.

He noted the lack of consensus of a definition of 'lifelong learning', and was concerned that lifelong learning and adult education be

equated. He sees it as a fuzzy, politically expedient term. He noted the paradox of lifelong learning—it enjoys a positive image, but the disenfranchised accept educational exclusion as their reward for failure. Inequalities will be felt as:

- closure of options for the unskilled
- increased general community expectations of education levels
- a new politics of poverty and welfare
- an absence of less educated people from the learning culture.

He noted that the most valuable skill is the skill of knowing how to learn.

Barbara Bee's theme was the notion of loss. There have been educational losses through a focus on vocational education, ignoring students' lives. Compulsion leads to low self esteem. Students are losing their own lives in this climate. Curriculum should come through students' lives: students will learn best from sharing their own life experience, not trying to learn skills imposed from outside. There is a need to look at the impact of policy on lives, to see that current policy leads to disillusion and anger. It's dishonest—there are no jobs at the end of job training. Our aim as teachers should be to help our students find the words to describe their lives.

Rosie Wickert used Usher's notion that post-modern fragmentation provides opportunities for diversity and switches emphasis to the learner. Diversity offers many forms of lifelong learning, and we may need to sacrifice the notion of teacher—we're looking at adult literacy learning, not adult literacy teaching. If the learner can have influence, then things will fragment.

Rosie explored what ACAL and the advocates of adult literacy have learned so far: to listen to those who have showed us ourselves, how to read and understand policy, how to write ourselves into the policies and texts. There's a need to argue and be explicit about adult education. It's not implicit like school education.

Adult Literacy has become mainstream, and we've put it there. There are advantages and disadvantages in this. We've participated in the writing of the NRS because if we hadn't others would have done it for us. But the NRS has meant the construction of borders around our borderless field. Being mainstream has meant putting literacy where it's invisible in training packages. Mutual Obligation has manipulated the tools of accountability (NRS) for purposes other than those they were designed for.

Everyone, including the politicians, knows the system isn't working, but they don't know what

to do about it.

Round-table discussions

The following key issues were presented by each group arising from discussions.

Literacy and lifelong learning—policy

- *National adult literacy policy should reflect diversity of learners and their needs*
- *Learners' needs in a range of contexts—recognition needed*
- *How learners are compartmentalised*
- *Research needed—evidence of tracking (longitudinal studies), how things work or don't work*
- *Develop policy—need to consult with diverse range of stakeholders*
- *Lifelong learning—are we comfortable with the notion? Is it too watered down? An umbrella term?*
- *Policy implications of lifelong learning*
- *Language/literacy debate*

Literacy and lifelong learning—community

- *Need to network at political level ('community' approach)*
- *How does the system work in lifelong learning? How do individuals get what they want from those who have it?*

Literacy and lifelong learning—workplace

- *WELL programs and good practice*
- *Framing the future*
- *ACAL negotiation with and education of companies re literacy and lifelong learning*
- *Initial assessment/evaluation contradiction*
- *Lobby government—federal versus state funding systems*
- *Lifelong learning—the learner is the context*

Literacy and Lifelong learning—post-compulsory

- *Youth at risk challenges*
- *Models that work*
- *Holistic approach needed*
- *ESL/ALBE relationship*
- *Literacy as a social voice*

Literacy and lifelong learning—on-line contexts

- *Ownership issues/lack of access and resources*
- *Not the only source of education (face to face will continue to exist)*
- *Access issues—flexibility, location, transparency, technical resources and support*
- *ACAL's role*
- *Best practice—examples, sites, models (register on ACAL web site)*
- *Encourage and develop PD for teachers*
- *Active role developing on-line materials*
- *Critical literacy should be highlighted*

Pat Hazell,
Masonic Centre, Sydney,
15 June, 2001

Literacy Link evaluation

—results of readers' survey of the ACAL newsletter

by David Dickson

A reader survey was taken recently to provide feedback to assist the task of making *Literacy Link* as relevant to its readers as possible. ACAL produces *Literacy Link* with funding from the Commonwealth Government. We decided to publish results of the reader survey in the hope that readers will recognise their ownership of this newsletter and be encouraged to contribute ideas and feedback to the editorial committee.

The evaluation was distributed as an insert in a normal mail-out of *Literacy Link*. Twenty-two readers took the time to fill in and return the evaluation form. Generally the responses were very encouraging but there were a number of criticisms made about the format and the focus of the content. In the main responses were happy with the mix of articles.

The responses to question 3 included below were chosen because they were particularly pithy and to the point (*A waste of resources at*

present!), or because they reveal something about the range of interests of our readers.

3.1 Which articles have you found particularly useful or relevant? What made them helpful?

Articles about current policy directions/funding allocations.

I look to ACAL for national policy information, future directions etc, rather than more practitioner-type info.

'Technology and Literacy' (April 2000) was especially relevant as I am using technology more with the students.

Articles on current information eg, LLN in Training Packages.

Case study type stories/articles about what people are actually doing.

I love reading Literacy Link; more cartoons please.

Literacy on line—can it work?

Practical tips for classroom teaching.

Literacy Link evaluation

| | Yes | No | Blank |
|---|-----|----|-------|
| 1. Overall comments: | | | |
| a. How have you used 'Literacy Link'? | | | |
| - do you read it cover to cover, or | 11 | 6 | 5 |
| - browse through, just reading pages that look interesting, or | 14 | 0 | 8 |
| b. Have you used 'Literacy Link' or any sections of the newsletter as part of a class activity? | 4 | 17 | 1 |
| c. Would you recommend the newsletter to colleagues? | 18 | 1 | 3 |
| 2. Format: | | | |
| a. Is <i>Literacy Link</i> easy to read? | 18 | 2 | 2 |
| b. Is the newsletter layout satisfactory in terms of | | | |
| - typography (use of fonts, headings &c)? | 20 | 1 | 1 |
| - copy and proof editing? | 17 | 1 | 1 |
| - visuals (illustrations, photographs, cartoons, tables &c)? | 17 | 1 | 4 |
| c. Do you like the existing 16 page, 2-colour format? | 19 | 2 | 1 |
| d. Would you like <i>Literacy Link</i> to have more pages? | 8 | 13 | 1 |
| 3. See article (pages 12–13) | | | |
| 4. Editorial: | | | |
| a. Do you know who puts out each issue of <i>Literacy Link</i> ? | 10 | 11 | 1 |
| b. Should there be a letters to the editor section? | 17 | 3 | 2 |
| c. Should ACAL provide political and/or policy commentary in <i>Literacy Link</i> ? | 20 | 1 | 1 |
| 5. See article (pages 13) | | | |
| 6. Would you like additional copies? | 2 | 15 | 5 |

Themed editions are useful.

Articles which offer practical suggestions and invite reflection on my own practice.

3.2 Which articles or sections of the newsletter have you found difficult to read, uninteresting or irrelevant? What could be done to improve them?

None, [I'm] quite a fan.

Industry related training—could be shorter perhaps (say) just an abstract.

The article by the welfare agency on young people in LANT program had an erroneous understanding of how the program worked. Many young people have welcomed this opportunity to learn and get off the welfare cycle.

Articles that talk about NRS and competencies were heavy going.

3.3 In what ways are case studies of good practice helpful?

Not helpful—shorter abstracts with contact details would be sufficient.

Case studies of good practice are helpful because of the engagement and empathy that occurs.

I prefer longer articles rather than short reports Useful if they provide a range of approaches to delivery rather than the continued 'class-room' approach that this survey has implicitly advocated.

Literacy teachers reinventing themselves and their work would be interesting

Helpful if focus is on central elements of success including obstacles faced and how they were managed.

Useful but I would like to see more examples of resources used ie, lessons, tools etc.

[They] provide ideas for my own practice and show how it can work: I often get ideas I can use.

It's good to see best practice acknowledged and given air play.

Difficult to access what 'Good Practice' is.

Useful to have case studies of programs eg, for indigenous people or examples of community development.

Bringing new ideas support and strategies that can be utilised to my attention. Working in isolation often means that case studies of good practice are the way I review and reinvigorate my own practice.

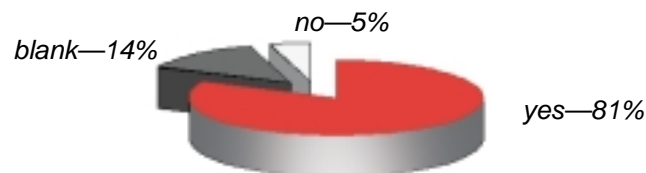
Should this type of article be extended?

Definitely—learning and being responsible and pro-active involves weighing up a range of possibilities. There's never one correct way to respond to needs.

3.4 In what ways is putting the spotlight on particular providers section helpful?

I find having the spotlight on one section better

Evaluation question 1(c)



Would you recommend 'Literacy Link' to colleagues?

for concept development than having a variety of articles.

Haven't noticed this as a particular section.

Should this type of article be extended?

No. Again, abstracts would suffice.

Yes, it is a good way to get ideas and find out how other people are reacting to policy and funding changes while ensuring a quality service to their clients.

3.5 Are there any issues or programs which you think are under-represented?

Broader issues such as Commonwealth/state funding; research projects.

Technology and its use continues to evolve, I would like articles on this topic.

Perhaps updates on funded LLN projects.

Keep it varied and relevant you are on the right track.

Flexible delivery methods/strategies.

Aboriginal Literacy.

Women specific programs.

What would you like to see articles deal with in the future?

More theory/theoretical background with some rigour—not the wishy washy stuff of recent issues.

Practical step-by-step lessons for untrained volunteer tutors. (The insert from QCAL looks promising—first useful thing that's appeared.)

Teaching pronunciation—current attitudes to teaching phonetics taught at university is not to over emphasise grammar but students want it.

Teaching in context, particularly numeracy versus 'straight' teaching which younger students prefer.

Volunteer tutors—training and coordination does not receive much publicity.

Could be more on philosophical aspects of teaching adult literacy.

Articles by experts in their fields from as wide a range of providers as possible.

I think there should be less description and more critique.

5. Anything else you would like to tell us?

No advertising—takes up important space in an already short newsletter.



Recently, I had the good fortune to represent the South Australian Council Adult Literacy (SACAL) at the ACAL forum, *Literacy and lifelong learning: social justice for all.*

The highlight of the forum, for me, was the keynote address, delivered by Chris Sidoti. This gentleman's credentials are far too numerous to detail here. He captured the attention of his audience the instant he began his informative and inspirational presentation. Immediately, the icy wind blowing outside along Castlereagh Street, which had been on everyone's mind as we entered the building, was forgotten.

I describe this address as informative, for Chris presented statistics which clearly demonstrated the need for literacy training in Australia. The presentation was, even more importantly, inspiring, as Chris valued the work done by voluntary and professional tutors and simultaneously contextualised the quintessential right of each individual to an education. Thus, our role as educators was not only valued by Chris as us delivering a service, but he elevated our work to the level of equipping individuals with a basic human right. This fact is already recognised by those teaching literacy, but it was wonderful to hear the importance of literacy articulated and in a language we shall be able to use to advocate on behalf of those we teach.

Fundamentally, Chris explained, each person has a right to an education. The point was put forward forcefully that education means much more than just providing a person with the necessary skills to become employable. The basic human right to education means that each must

receive the opportunity to develop a free and wide ability to wander within one's mind to obtain, as fully as possible, an understanding of life. This does not mean instructing our clients in deeply philosophical issues but, instead, empowers each of us to offer our students/clients the ability to function in, and fully participate in, daily life. We must enable them to be able to access the basic needs each individual has, free of discrimination and with expectations equal to the expectations of any member of society.

An integral component of education is advocacy. We must empower our students/clients to be able to advocate on their own behalf, as part of their skilling for survival in life. We need to be advocates and to lobby the various government departments and representatives so they have a full understanding of the needs of the education sector. Perhaps, here is a role for both ACAL and SACAL. Jointly, we can, at least, make known to the government the need and right of every Australian to education, as defined in the recent forum's keynote address.

Through the immediacy and strength of his delivery, Chris inspired those present to act. I urge you too, after reading this brief recount of his stirring address, to be inspired into action, on behalf of those you teach and your fellow colleagues.

Paul Mulroney
Member of the executive committee of the
South Australian Council for Adult Literacy
(SACAL)

—results of readers' survey (cont)

Why not have advertising if there are interested bodies?

If current funding continues, then no advertising.

Can ACAL afford to be seen to be promoting certain products/kits/courses etc?

I have no objection to advertisements—I ignore them and they help with finances.

Yes—I would be interested in leaflets on new resources or programs. We have one that could be inserted though these would also have to be vetted as inserting an ad/leaflet may inadvertently impress readers that this is an endorsement.

The web site version is particularly useful.

Why not put it on-line?

I found the cartoons that used to be in Good

Practice really great and have used them to illustrate talks about literacy. Could we have an occasional one?

More teaching resources—one page only, near the back.

Writing often could do with good editing (eg, report on WA Conference, font spacing, layout make it hard to read physically)

A waste of resources at present!

Distribution / receipt dates have been pretty erratic.

I don't like every article finishing at the back of the magazine. I get many and this is the only one set out like this. I get annoyed reading it. Do what other magazines do! Finish one article and then start a new one.

Also, is it necessary to have glossy paper?

Literacy Aid Uganda was founded after outcries of several people, especially women, who did not know how to read and write. Their husbands were despising them. When this idea came to my attention a few years ago I did not take it lightly. I had the opportunity of attaining education up to a Masters degree level and I gave the issue some deep consideration.

In Uganda and Africa as a whole, educating girls wasn't considered very important and as you may notice in our photographs, the majority of these people are women. Educating girls was seen as a waste of money since they could be easily married off. Girls were looked at as a source of wealth for their parents who could be married off early in exchange for bride price.

I have now carried out my vision to help women who were disadvantaged. It is summarised thus—that these people's problems were not only not knowing how to read and write but were also a result of living in poor conditions. Their household incomes were very low due to lack of employment.

I couldn't wait for funding and with my small savings I got a place to rent, acquired a computer, some stationery and placed an advertisement at the door of the office. The advertisement called for anyone interested in teaching on a voluntary basis and those interested in learning how to read and write at no cost.

It took time to get volunteer teachers as this was a new phenomenon. Some people cannot imagine working without any payment. After two months, a lady volunteered who is now a member on the Board of Directors. We later got three more volunteers who we have been working with us ever since. We also started getting the learners one by one and soon we were getting about 12 registrations each week.

We currently have over 200 learners. Definitely, the space we have is small and we cannot accommodate all these, so we have divided these classes into 6 groups, as we are unable to give an opportunity to all. The adult learners are first taught their mother tongue, and on mastering their mother tongue, we then teach them English so that they can be able to communicate with other people. We also teach them general knowledge.

We have not got any funding in cash as yet but people are donating benches, books, chalk and many other things which is very encouraging to us. We keep on receiving a number of people who

just come in to thank us for the work being done and this makes our day. Furthermore, the learners' testimonials on the difference made in their lives have given their teachers reason to smile.



Their appreciation has been a great encouragement to us and looking at them is like they have been given back treasures which had previously been taken away from them.

We are also setting up resource centres in different districts of Uganda for easy access of information to the people. We are also in the process of setting up a Vocational Training centre with practical skills such as tailoring, knitting and carpentry so that these people can be equipped with skills which can be helpful for them to become self-sustaining. We also hold lectures on relevant topics, for example AIDS awareness, management skills and others.

What is interesting is that what began as one person's thing is now a members' organisation. Literacy Aid Uganda has come to be known as a school for adult learners overshadowing other activities. It is a non-governmental, non-profit organisation, augmenting the government's efforts to eradicate poverty through literacy. A board of trustees, directors and the General Assembly govern Literacy Aid Uganda.

In our experience we have found that adult learners are very special people. They are a source of encouragement and so much can be learned from them. They are special people, who need patience, encouragement and assurance that they can make it in life.

As our motto states, 'We seek to help others' and whatever happens we are ready to carry on, to make the world a better place for everyone.

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Back issues of *Literacy Link* and *ACAL View*, and ACAL-commissioned literacy research papers can all be obtained from the ACAL web site —

www.acal.edu.au

