



ACAL's work in the coming year

by Jim Thompson, ACAL President

A CAL has been successful in securing funding of \$105,000 from the Adult Literacy Programme Section of the Department of Science, Education and Training (DEST) for the following three projects in 2004. ACAL gratefully acknowledges the support that DEST has provided over the years.

National Forum—Responding to Diversity: Building literate and numerate communities

Both nationally and internationally a more integrated approach to adult literacy policy is emerging, with a trend towards a whole-of-government approach. Adult literacy must have a place in these new directions and this fits well with the ANTA strategy, *Shaping our Future*, with its 'built-in not bolted-on' approach to equity and diversity. The outcomes of the forum will contribute to an options paper to be presented as ACAL's contribution to the development of a national adult literacy strategy.

Research think-tank

At the same time as the development of ACAL's future directions strategy and other national policy developments in adult literacy, Professor Rosie Wickert is undertaking an NCVER project to explore the possibilities and constraints to

successful integrated, partnership approaches to adult literacy in community contexts. A small, focused cross-sectoral workshop will be convened to explore possible policy directions on the basis of the research findings. Key strategic thinkers from other sectors will be approached to participate.

The think-tank will be held in Sydney the day before the national forum in early August. Its deliberations will be fed directly into the national forum. The outcome of the two days' work in Sydney will then be linked to the NCVER national research forum, *Adult literacy: a barometer on policy and practice* to be held in Melbourne the day before the national conference in September.



Melbourne—venue for the National Adult Literacy Conference in September 2004. Have you registered? (see pages 3 and 9)

Literacy Link

There will be continued publication in 2004-5 of Australia's only national adult literacy newsletter, *Literacy Link*, which provides an important forum for showcasing good practice, discussion of policy issues and outlining national and international research trends.

ACAL is also working towards these goals in 2004:

- The development of an adult literacy strategy based on research and extensive consultation that will ensure adult literacy remains on professional and political agendas
- The continued support of further development of the ANTA national strategy
- In association with VALBEC, the provision of professional development through the national conference in Melbourne
- Building stronger support across sectors to support new directions in adult literacy
- Improving the efficiency of the organisation by reviewing current governance and management operations
- Continuing to develop a sustainable operation for the adult literacy archive.

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Changing policy environments— forthcoming national forum

by Rosie Wickert

ACAL and the adult literacy movement generally have had considerable success over the last decade in raising public consciousness around the significance of adult literacy and numeracy. This has been achieved by a combination of research, political influence and the professional expertise of literacy educators and it has resulted in a broad acceptance of the importance of generic skills to Australia's continuing economic success.

ACAL National Forum

Responding to Diversity: Building literate and numerate communities



*To be held at the Ku-ring-gai Campus of the University
Technology Sydney (UTS) on Friday August 6th*

Advocating for adult literacy in its own right has probably run its course, although the evidence regarding the levels of skill of Australian adults provides little room for complacency. Approaches are needed that will build on the successes of earlier adult literacy and numeracy policy, and at the same time establish further directions likely to gain political and public support for continuing to build the literacy and numeracy capability of the adult population.

Analyses of international policy show that many governments are working to integrate literacy and numeracy within wider cross-sectoral portfolios (Castleton and McDonald 2002). There is evidence in Australia, too, that a more 'joined-up', coordinated whole-of-government, approach to social and educational policy is in the ascendancy.

Such an intention connects well with the arguments for a 'built-in not bolted-on' approach to the equity and diversity elements of the new Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) Strategy, *Shaping our Future*. What are the possibilities for adult literacy and numeracy development in these policy directions? And what further possibilities and probabilities are emerging in policy platforms around the coming

federal election? The need for a new national adult literacy and numeracy strategy, one that is a companion to, but is not be limited by, possibilities emerging from the ANTA Strategy, has already been flagged by DEST and ANTA. ACAL must offer a highly informed and creative contribution to the discussions that the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) will be hosting, as the case for a new national strategy is progressed in a national forum in Melbourne in September (see NCVER notice on page 7).

This coming ACAL forum will be a little different to many of our previous forums. Rather than raise issues, listen to others or advocate for change, it aims to bring together leaders, innovative practitioners and strategists from a number of policy areas to work with adult literacy and numeracy experts on a shared way forward. The Forum will test the proposition that adult literacy is integral to individual and community capacity building. In preparation for this working forum, ACAL has commissioned a consultant to identify and engage with likely supporters in other sectors. The forum will also draw on recent NCVER research reports.

Who should come?

We will not be starting the day with a blank sheet. ACAL will invite people to contribute to the preparation for the Forum and this work should ensure real progress is made on the day. In addition to invited participants, ACAL welcomes anyone who is involved in or who has an interest in approaches to literacy and numeracy development in ways indicated above and who wants to help ACAL workshop possible future directions for adult literacy and numeracy policy. This includes educators, health, social and community workers, managers, planners and researchers in any relevant field.

Outcome

An options paper, based on the outcomes of the forum will contribute to the further development of any proposed national adult literacy and numeracy strategy, ACAL's strategy and the ANTA strategy.

Details

The Forum will be on 6th August, 2004 at the North Shore Conference Centre. The Centre is located at the UTS Ku-ring-gai Campus, Eton Road, Lindfield. For more information, contact Alex Tsakmakis on 03 9469 2950 or email acal@pacific.net.au



Australian Council for Adult Literacy

2004 National Adult Literacy Conference

four seasons in one day – literacies in changing climates

Friday, September 9 - Saturday, September 11, 2004
Carlton Crest Hotel, Melbourne, Victoria

The conference title *Four Seasons in One Day: Literacies in Changing Climates*, encapsulates the shifting nature of how we live and work and the breadth and diversity of the adult literacy and numeracy fields. The conference theme alludes to the potential for exploring literacies in changing climates, be they political, social, economic or educational.

Speakers include:

Morag Fraser, regular contributor to newspapers, radio and television, editor of *Eureka Street* magazine from 1991 to 2003 is Adjunct Professor in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at La Trobe University.

Dr Ursula Howard, Director of the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy based at the Institute of Education, University of London. As Director, Ursula leads on the strategic management and research and development programmes of NRDC, the national centre dedicated to research and development on adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL.



Research Forum

National Research Forum and Strategic Conversation
Pre-Conference – Thursday, September 9

Research is a valuable tool for testing where we are at and helps us chart a course as to where we are headed. The aim of this event is to present findings from the national adult literacy research program as a barometer on current policy and practice - allied with a strategic conversation to inform the development of a national adult language, literacy and numeracy strategic plan.

Full Information at www.valbec.org.au/acalconf/



Hosted by the Victorian Adult Literacy and Basic Education Council

'Four seasons in
one day'—
Conference update

—see page 9.

Literacy Link (ISSN 0158-3026) is the newsletter of the Australian Council for Adult Literacy, a voluntary organisation set up in 1976 to support the development of adult literacy, numeracy and basic education in Australia.

ACAL promotes co-operation among interested organisations and individuals, both government and non-government, by undertaking and encouraging appropriate study, research and action.

Literacy Link is distributed FREE—to obtain your copy contact ACAL. Back issues are available from the ACAL web site— www.acal.edu.au

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Disclaimer

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Numeracy provision and marginalised youth

by Mavis Burns

Mavis Burns combines literacy and numeracy teaching with her job as youth coordinator at the Ridgeway Campus, Gold Coast Institute of TAFE. The article below derives mainly from her experience in the classroom with young people, and her long held conviction that it is possible for mathematics to be broken down into simplified ideas in ways that make it able to be understood and remembered—'If I can understand it, then there is a good chance the students can too!'

Usually a shudder of horror is expressed when students are asked whether they like mathematics. This is commonly followed by a confession that they never were 'good at maths'. As a practitioner I frequently come across this reaction and wonder why so many people feel this way.

Most of the youthful students that I work with lack confidence and tend to blame their lack of intelligence as the factor that contributed to their dislike of mathematics. Others blame their previous teachers: 'They never taught me properly'. Yet these same students indicate they would love to master this difficult subject if they were just given the chance.

It is therefore important to query why we insist on making mathematics so difficult for individuals to embrace. Do we deliberately or subconsciously attempt to alienate or filter society so as to reward those who have mastered maths concepts? Is it really necessary to use complex language to explain formulas and concepts that could be simplified so that everybody could understand them? Should we look at ways to stimulate student curiosity by providing questions that query their true understanding of what numbers mean in today's society? Can we not make mathematics more relevant, more fun and more meaningful so that students no longer feel anxiety when the word 'maths' is announced?

It is now generally understood that employees require estimation, problem solving and use of technology skills to succeed even in entry level occupations. Unfortunately the majority of students who prematurely left the school system lack these basic skills. My aim is to reengage these students with the world of mathematics so that they can experience the pleasure of success.

If we can create a platform on which we develop students' curiosity to explore our world through numbers, we can then motivate them to attempt the basic concepts of mathematics. It is important to create a classroom in which students' ideas are provoked and aroused. In my own classroom I sometimes try to stimulate thought by posing questions such as:

How do you say this number— 42123123123? Then demonstrate how easy it is to say large numbers once you have discovered the pattern (hundreds, tens, and ones).

42 123 123 123 is forty two billion one hundred twenty three million one hundred twenty three thousand one hundred twenty three.

Once the number is said correctly 42123123123 I then ask the students what this number represents in our society today? (Answer: the approximate wealth of Bill Gates.) I then challenge the students to work out how much he would make in a year, a month, a day, an hour, a minute and a second if he made 10% in interest. This is a great way to introduce estimation and percentages.

Another question I might ask is:

How many billionaires are there in the world today?

(Answer: 587 according to Forbes magazine 2004.)

How much wealth do they represent? (\$1.9 trillion)

How does this compare to the wealth of the 7.1 million people requiring food aid in Ethiopia?

Or other questions such as:

Could you stack a billion dollars worth of \$5.00 notes in your classroom? This demonstrates volume and the concept of how much a billion dollars really represents in real life.

How many people could you fit in a classroom if you stacked them in? How many classrooms would you require if you could fit the whole population of the world into classrooms?

These types of questions not only allow for mathematical discussion but also provide students with a better knowledge of what the amounts really mean.

In my experience, learning the times tables is another area where disengaged students can share a common interest. Given the opportunity, students welcome the opportunity to learn these skills....and once learnt the students are back on the road to empowerment. There are numerous strategies to assist them in learning the tables.

Nine times table—

- Use of fingers
- Multiply by 10 and subtract the number you are multiplying by ($4 \times 9 = 4 \times 10 - 4 = 36$)
- The number multiplied by is one ten more than the answer, and both digits add up to nine
 $9 \times 6 = 60 - 10 + ? = 50 + ?$
 $5 + ? = 9 \quad ? = 4 \quad 9 \times 6 = 54$

Five times table—

- If they can read an analog clock they know their five times table— each number represents increments of 5 minutes. Eg. The 4 on the clock = 20 minutes.
- Multiply by 10 (add a zero) and halve the answer. Eg $8 \times 5 =$ half of $80 = 40$

There are useful mnemonic devices for other tables—

- 7×7 is one less than 50
- 7×8 — say out loud '5678' $56 = 7 \times 8$
- $8 \times 8 = 64$ (sequence 864)

There are many techniques to assist the learning of the times table including jingles, drawings and memory jogs. Encouraging students to remember or devise methods that help them to remember will result in students that become more confident and positive towards math. It is also important to teach students to understand that there are many ways to obtain the correct answer. The multiplication of two digit numbers 148×22 illustrates this point.

Conventional Method

	1	4	8
	x	2	2
	2	9	6
2	9	6	0
3	2	5	6

Ancient Egyptian Method

Double each row of numbers until those in the left column reach just below the number multiplied by (22)

Choose numbers in the left column to add up to 22—cross out the ones you don't need use. Add

*	148
2	296
4	592
8	1184
16	2368
<u>22</u>	<u>3256</u>

the numbers on the right.

Russian Peasant Method

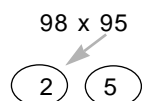
Halve the left column of figures and double the right. Round down eg. (Half of 5 = 2) until you reach 1. Cross out if figures on both sides are even (the first and fourth lines).

22	1184
11	296
5	592
2	1184
1	2368
	<u>3256</u>

You might be challenged to look up the 'Gelosian method' on the Internet if you would like to learn another method.

Another interesting method is highlighted in the book *Teach Your Children Tables* by Bill Handley. For example—

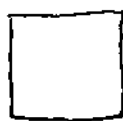
Multiplying 98×95 uses 100 as a reference point. In the circles below put the number that will add to the 98 and 95 to make 100.



Subtract one of the diagonals
 Eg. $95 - 2 = 93$ then multiply the two circled numbers together. Eg. $2 \times 5 = 10$
 Therefore the answer is **9310**.

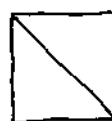
Other ways to teach maths include using simplified formulas. How to find area is an example: Use the formula of area of a square (length x width) as the basis to working out the area of squares, rectangles, triangles and circles:

square



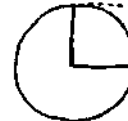
length
x width

triangle

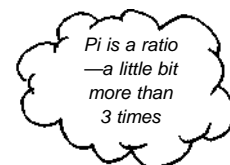


length
x width
divided by 2

circle



The area of a circle is a little more than 3 times (Pi) the area of a square on the radius.



What I have said here is not conclusive, because I know from experience there are many ways to make mathematics more interesting and achievable. With the wealth of information readily available on the Internet, it is up to the imagination of the teacher as to what they can introduce to students to make maths the students' favorite subject.

Mavis Burns
 Ridgeway Campus
 Gold Coast Inst. of TAFE

There is a widely held view that young offenders in juvenile justice centres have very low literacy levels and that this keeps them locked into a life of crime because they find it hard to get jobs. However, Macquarie University research has substantiated mounting international evidence that most young offenders are at least functionally literate and are probably no worse than their non-offending peers from similar socio-economic backgrounds.



The research by Director of Macquarie University's Special Education Centre (MUSEC), Professor Kevin Wheldall and colleague Renae Watkins was published in the February edition of the international journal *Educational Review*.

Prior to the study, Wheldall had every expectation of finding evidence to support the popular view that juvenile justice detainees are frequently illiterate, and it was his aim to document just how poor at reading these detainees were.

'But contrary to what we expected, there is not a huge population of illiterates in prison,' Wheldall says.

He believes that one of the reasons we think that prisoners or juvenile justice detainees of any age are illiterate is because they may not be able to read as well as the general population.



Professor Kevin Wheldall

'But the prison population is not representative of the general population,' he says. 'The prison population is largely comprised of people from low socio-economic backgrounds. If you compared kids from juvenile justice centres with kids from similar backgrounds who have not been in trouble with the law, their literacy levels would probably be very similar.'

'The relationship between poor literacy levels and juvenile delinquency has become widely accepted without a large body of empirical evidence to support it,' Wheldall says. 'This study suggests that this may be an overly simplistic view, and that while it may be true for a small proportion of subjects, it does not appear to be true for the majority.'

The previously accepted literature includes Wheldall's own report (with Beaman in 2000)

which stated that 'initial disaffection and subsequent alienation from school may lead some students into a potential for a generic decline into petty crime/delinquency. For many of these students, the problems appear to begin early as a result of initial academic failure in learning basic literacy skills and are then exacerbated by the increasing demands made by a largely text-based curriculum predicated upon mastery of the very skills in which they are most deficient.'

Other UK research pointed to the link between dyslexia and crime, and the NSW Legislative Council reported in 1992 that 'the low levels of literacy among many young detained offenders (were) of concern'.

While most of the research has recognised that low literacy levels alone do not lead to juvenile delinquency, some have gone so far as to suggest that low literacy achievement is the main precursor for juvenile offending.

Wheldall says that the logical related argument—that we can reduce crime by combating illiteracy - is clearly a tempting proposition, but this may be an overly simplistic notion.

'It would also need to be shown convincingly that the typical literacy levels of young offenders are so low, in comparison to their peers, as to make it difficult for them to cope in the world other than via criminal activity,' he says.

One way of determining if this is the case is to assess the proportion of juvenile offenders who could be regarded as 'functionally literate' - a term that refers to the minimum levels of reading and writing skill necessary to get by in the everyday world of work and social activities.

'This represents, crudely, reading at the level of the average 10 to 11 year old, and is achieved by most students by the end of Year 5,' Wheldall explains.

Wheldall's study comprised 68 males, the majority aged 16 or 17 years, on remand within a juvenile justice facility in New South Wales over a three-month period. He explains that the sample, while small, was representative as all detainees of the centre during the survey period were examined.

'Of the 74 students enrolled at the centre in this period there was relevant literacy assessment

Adult literacy: A barometer on policy and practice

This Research Forum will bring participants up-to-date with the latest findings from key research on adult language, literacy and numeracy.

The forum will cover:

- What does literacy mean in today's world?
- How does literacy impact on life, workplaces, training and community?
- What are the new approaches to literacy provision?
- What are the features of successful adult literacy policy?

After the Forum, participants will be invited to take part in a discussion hosted by ANTA and the Department of Education, Science and Training, to inform the development of a national adult

language, literacy and numeracy strategic plan as a companion document to *Shaping our future, the national strategy for VET 2004–2010*.

The event is aimed at policy makers, employer and employee organisations, specialist adult literacy educators, community education providers and interested individuals.

This event is run in conjunction with the Australian Council of Adult Literacy National Conference on 10 - 11 September 2004.

**Thursday
9 September 2004
9am - 3.30pm
Carlton Crest Hotel
Melbourne
\$55 GST inc**

For further information, or to register for the Research Forum and the ACAL conference, contact the **Victorian Adult Literacy and Basic Education Council (VALBEC)** at www.valbec.org.au/acalconf.

www.valbec.org.au/acalconf

data present for 68 participants. The decreased sample size was due to students being discharged before assessments were completed, or there being no data present for reasons unknown,' Wheldall explains.

Each detainee was individually assessed on measures of reading and spelling using the Burt Word Reading Test, the South Australian Spelling Test and subjects' own ratings of their reading ability.

Wheldall found that 75 per cent of detainees were able to read at or above functional literacy level, and nearly 70 per cent were well in excess of this minimum literacy level. However, the majority of detainees produced critically low spelling scores, with 66 per cent scoring below the norms and 57 per cent producing critically low scores.

'Aboriginal detainees achieved the lowest levels,' Wheldall says. 'Nine (13 per cent) of the 68 participants identified themselves as Aboriginal, and the results indicated they had a much lower literacy level as a group, with the average level being below functional literacy.'

Since Wheldall completed his study, he has discovered a lot of unpublished reports - both Australian and international, including a report from the Institute of Criminology at Cambridge University - that substantiate his findings.

'They call it the literacy myth,' he says. 'In retrospect, it is quite a romantic notion that these folk are condemned to a life of crime because they cannot read.'

Of course these findings do not mean that we shouldn't be offering literacy programs to juvenile detainees, or concentrating on kids from low socio-economic backgrounds.

'But they do show the hypothesised link between illiteracy and offending may be more complicated than previously assumed,' Wheldall says.

*Email the researcher—
kevin.wheldall@mq.edu.au*

*This article first appeared in 'Macquarie University News'. Story by Kathy Vozella
Photo by Michelle Wilson*

What might intergenerational learning look like?

by Jane Speechley

The word 'intergenerational' has taken on new meaning since the Treasurer, Hon. Peter Costello, brought down the Intergenerational Report in 2002. Too often it has become code for concern about explosive costs to the state of an ageing population. That narrow fiscal definition has done little to illuminate the underlying cultural issues we face from powerful demographic and social changes. In this article Jane Speechley outlines activities and themes for the forthcoming Adult Learners' Week

Despite the push to keep Australians working longer, the cult of youth prevails. Wisdom and experience are undervalued (except in our Indigenous communities where learning from elders has been an intrinsic part of traditional culture); age discrimination is prevalent. Different family structures, a highly mobile population, a tendency towards single living mean that people do not interact across generations in the way they used to. That makes learning from the old or the young an unfamiliar concept. It is one we wish to revive during Adult Learners' Week 2004.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), within 30 years the global older adult population (65+) will double. Transfer of their knowledge to a younger generation will be important for maintaining a cohesive workforce and for succession planning. Retraining older people in new technologies and approaches will become an important role for young people. Learning to learn from each other will be one of the skills we will all need as the twenty-first century progresses.

Learning between generations has much more to deliver than the bottom line.

It is also a means to combat age discrimination and stereotyping, for the transfer of wisdom and the stimulation of a lifelong learning culture.

Intergenerational learning takes place in the community in many ways. Adults of all ages may serve as literacy tutors, mentors, parent outreach workers, after-school volunteers. Many find themselves assisting in childcare and transferring skills in fishing, knitting, gardening and the rest.

Younger people can provide respite services to the frail elderly and their families, conduct oral history interviews with older members of their community, demonstrate the power of information technology and teach English to older immigrants and refugees. They also work side-by-side with both children and older adults in

arts, environmental, and service projects.

Such activities do not need to take place in parallel. Many will encourage productive multi-directional exchanges of information, with those involved stepping out of traditional roles: the teacher becomes the student and vice versa. As relationships build, stereotypes break down. The youth with green hair and a nose stud seems less intimidating; the white haired lady on a walking stick appears much less feeble.

A great deal of intergenerational learning occurs without being labelled as such. Mentoring in the workplace and the community is a widespread practice; transfer of knowledge in the family usually takes place without even being recognised as a learning experience.

There is good reason to put the spotlight on what is already happening and to encourage more learning between generations. The Leader of the Opposition, Mark Latham, has recently done so by emphasising the importance of reading to children and raising the question of parenting education. To properly deal with problems of poor literacy rates, not just among children but also among Australian adults (twenty per cent of whom are not functionally literate) we cannot ignore the urgent need to encourage everyone to keep on learning, for their own benefit, now and into old age, and for the next generations. Approaching this task together can be effective and fun.

It is that combination which we will strive to highlight during Adult Learners' Week (ALW) from 1-8 September 2004.

Family Literacy

Continuing the theme of literacy during the United Nations Literacy Decade, we will be encouraging discussion about family literacy. Research shows that insufficient adult literacy often becomes an obvious problem when children reach an age where adults can no longer assist with homework, or where the child's literacy skills start to overtake those of the parent. Greater support for adults who need help to continue reading to their children will be one

Update on the forthcoming national conference

by Lynne Matheson

There has been an overwhelming response to the ACAL 2004 conference call for papers and it has been an exacting and exhausting process to put the conference program together to ensure a balance and a range of streams, including literacy, numeracy, theory and practice, VET, youth, ICT, research and policy.

The structure of the two days is planned to give participants opportunities to engage in a range of activities and feel inspired and energised by conference end. There will be a few 'surprises' as attendees of previous VALBEC conferences have come to expect.

Ursula Howard, our first keynote speaker, is the Director of the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy at the University of London. She will present an overview of UK policies and practices and question the efficacy of key government strategies. She will consider the global context of

education and how changing literacies will affect social change. Rosie Wickert will introduce Ursula and engage in conversation around the Australian context in the conclusion to the keynote address. The Australian political climate is likely to have 'hotted up' by September so we expect that Morag Fraser, our second keynote speaker, will have much to work on with her address.

The Focus sessions will provide choices for participants to pursue areas of interest in depth. Some of the presenters of the focus sessions are: Zak Rahmani, Assistant Director, Economic Analysis, Growth and Evaluation Branch, Dept of Education, ACT; Janine Oldfield, Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Education, NT; Jean Searle, Senior Lecturer, School of Vocational, Technology & Arts Education, Griffith University, QLD; Crina Virgona and Peter Waterhouse, Workplace Learning Initiatives, VIC; Wendy Roberts, School of Foundation Studies, Manuka Institute of Technology, NZ.

element of our advocacy campaign during the week. We will seek to engage those places in the community—zoos, museums, galleries and libraries—where families learn. And we'll be on the look-out for surprising stories about inter-generational learning, like the day my thirteen-year old taught me to ...

Learn @ Work Day

Learn @ Work Day on 3 September will again be a feature of Adult Learners' Week. We will encourage our partners to showcase the inter-generational learning that takes place in their workplaces, from formal coaching to more casual exchanges of information between long-serving employees and new starters. It's shaping up to be a great week. We hope you'll enjoy it and that we'll reach more people than ever in the national campaign.

Got an idea?

ALA has already put together some suggestions for activities people may like to consider staging for this year's Adult Learners' Week—visit www.adultlearnersweek.org

There is still time to incorporate your ideas. If you have a proposal for an Adult Learners' Week intergenerational learning activity, email us on info@adultlearnersweek.org.

Jane Speechley,
Communications Manager,
Adult Learning Australia

Responding to feedback at last year's conference we have planned a Networks session on Friday afternoon, followed by the ACAL Annual General Meeting. The proposed network groups are rural, youth, indigenous, volunteer programs, corrections, disabilities. The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) will be conducting a short session on preparation of funding submissions that will be of value to participants considering future research projects.

There will be a meet-the-ACAL-Executive session to encourage discussion and feedback. The numeracy practical workshops on Saturday will give participants the opportunity to have a full day of interactive, 'hands on' activities to enhance their knowledge and skills.

The venue for the conference, the Carlton Crest, is located in a beautiful setting with Albert Park lake a short stroll away and the city centre a 10 minute tram ride. Interstate participants may like to extend their stay and should refer to the conference website for suggestions to make an even more memorable Melbourne experience.

The conference brochure and registration form is now available. Check the website www.valbec.org.au/conf or contact Don MacDowall 03 9546 6892 or info@valbec.org.au

▶ ADULT LITERACY RESEARCH

Literacy in the new millennium

Michele Lonsdale and Doug McCurry

▶ **THE WORLD HAS** changed profoundly over the last 50 years, and many of our longstanding assumptions about literacy and language need to be challenged. Thus, literacy has no single or universal definition, and it is often defined in contradictory ways. Some definitions focus on the skills needed by individuals for work, education, social interaction and the negotiation of everyday living. Others have a more social focus, such as the notion of it contributing knowledge to the creation of an empowered community. How it is defined shapes the kinds of policies developed and the teaching/learning practices adopted by the educational sector.

The meaning of literacy has changed over time from an elementary 'decoding' of words to a range of more complex and diverse skills and understandings. Changing conceptions of literacy need to be understood against a background of economic, social, political and cultural change. Recent theorists see literacy as a 'social practice' which should be considered in context, rather than the convention of literacy as an individual, cognitive skill.

Literacy can be described as a form of human capital, an essential functional skill for individual employment and economic sufficiency. A contrasting idea is that of literacy as 'enabling' and empowering individuals for critical reflection, rather than simply accepting existing social beliefs and institutions.

Social and economic change requires new literacies beyond print, but the boundaries are indistinct. Computing knowledge, and social comprehension skills, may be regarded either as 'literacies' or as 'generic skills' for employment.

There appear to be three main models of literacy which have implications for Australian policy-making, teaching and learning. These are the:

- cognitive, individual-based model, which assumes that levels of ability can be tested
- economics-driven model associated with workforce training, multi-skilling, productivity and the idea of 'human capital'
- socio-cultural model, which believes that the meaning of literacy depends on its context and thus, can have different interpretations.

The third model is preferred by the authors. Literacy, it is argued, can no longer be linked uncritically to demands of the economy and national training agenda. Although current research puts literacy with social practice, government policy aligns more with the traditional model of literacy as a set of foundation skills required by every individual.

▶ Messages for policy and practice

Research indicates the need for a new national definition and policy for literacy, recognising changing social and economic realities and ethnographic studies of literacy.

A new literacy policy should recognise non-print technologies, especially the literacies of information and communications technology (computer literacy).

Recognising literacy as a social practice, literacy policies should support the need for increasing the knowledge of the entire community, and not simply the skills of the individual.

Government policies should reflect that literacy needs will change over time with the age, sex and language of users. Literacy needs will also vary according to the context of use and ought to accommodate the full range of literacies found in society.

Literacy policies should be integrated at federal and state levels, supporting lifelong learning and improvements in adult literacy.

In literacy testing, there is a concern that national approaches rely too much on what is perceived to be the most dominant cultural, educational and social 'norm', or what is known as 'dominant literacies', in society. In addition, those who fail to meet the national standard are often blamed for their 'poor' performance, with no recognition that they may be from another ethnic or cultural group.

The more complex concepts of 'multiple' and 'situational' literacies include the ability to interpret and construct information, or to learn specific workplace literacies such as computer or science skills. These challenge traditional testing and benchmarks, and more thought should be given to other monitoring and accounting mechanisms. Such measures might be disinclined to mark individuals off against a dominant national standard, and more likely to value local (for example, Indigenous or ethnic) or less dominant literacies.

► Messages for employers and trainers

Trainers need to be able to recognise and teach the different literacies that learners require, valuing local as well as dominant literacies.

Effective teaching practice begins with the learner, implying that the government and employer-oriented discourses of workplace literacy should give greater recognition to workers' diversity.

In their own fields, all teachers are 'teachers of literacy'. They should value the range of different literacy abilities (oral, written, visual etc.) that different learners possess.

Rather than simply reproducing what is taught, learners should be given the tools to 'make sense of the world and construct their own perspectives'.

Literacy in the new millennium, by Michele Lonsdale and Doug McCurry, will be available soon. To be alerted when it is available, subscribe to NCVER News at <http://www.ncver.edu.au/ncverevents/news.html>

ACAL is pleased to publish selected NCVER Research Overviews in this and the following two issues of *Literacy Link*, and we invite readers to contribute their responses to them.

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▶ ADULT LITERACY RESEARCH

Great literacy debates

Adult Learning Australia

▶ **ADULT LEARNING AUSTRALIA (ALA)** is a national peak body representing organisations and individuals in the adult learning field. It also coordinates a national Adult Learners' Week each year.

To mark the first year of the United Nations Literacy Decade, Adult Learners' Week 2003 focused on literacy. One of the key activities was the Great Literacy Debates, which involved about 20 city and regional debates or forums, around Australia from 1-7 September 2003.

This paper is based on Adult Learning Australia's synopsis and is compiled from ten recorded events (six debates, two forums and two online discussions).

Adult Learning Australia provided participants with a project kit which were used to open up areas of discussion. Three topics were proposed, including 'literacy is the cornerstone of democracy', 'literacy is defined by context', and (most popularly debated) 'it is better to be literate than to be able to fish'. Other events used other topics or held free-ranging discussion.

Debates were conducted in the context of entertainment or a game. Many impromptu arguments originated from the teams and similar lines of thinking occurred in a number of debates.

▶ What is literacy?

Participants were encouraged to establish a clear, easy-to-understand definition of literacy. Many perceived literacy in contemporary terms, as a skill that is practised socially or contextually. They also reverted to describing literacy in traditional terms of reading and writing.

Teams also received the Australian Council for Adult Literacy's definition that 'being literate' means 'being able to participate as a citizen in a democracy, understanding and fulfilling one's role, being able to assess one's needs, having one's say and responding to the views and actions of others by engaging in the range of literacy/communication practices required in the public domain'.

Several debates agreed with this definition. For example, debaters denied that reading and writing alone imply literacy, referring instead to the range of skills required for social life, the workplace and the public domain. 'Literacy is happening all the time — when you watch a film, when you watch TV, when you send an SMS message, send an e-mail, read a book'.

Similarly, debaters argued that literacy enabled comprehension of the world, allowing individuals to access information and ideas, and to adapt to inevitable change. 'Literacy is in its most basic form how we understand and make sense of the world.'

This led to the idea that new forms of technology or communication breed new forms of literacy. In addition, particular groups — Adult Learning Australia examples included academics, Indigenous people and skilled fishermen — possess specialised forms of literacy that might be lost on the rest of us.

Reverting to traditional views of literacy, participants reminded their audiences of the power of '26 magical letters' to transform the reader's life, and the danger of anarchy if literacy were absent.

Some speakers took literacy to be more or less interchangeable with education. The command of 'literacy' was linked to the command of 'literature', although this viewpoint was challenged strongly as elitist.

► What is the value of literacy?

Discussions around the 'value' of literacy also looked at how people defined it. Literacy was valued in comparison with other concepts such as the oral tradition of storytelling which pre-dated it, and the survival skills which would be needed to live a completely natural life away from civilisation. Or, it was valued by imagining a world in which literacy would suddenly be taken from, or indeed given to, the individual or society. Thus, literacy was sometimes linked to wealth, personal enrichment, civilisation, the destruction of civilisation, and social participation.

A few debaters were explicit that the possession of literacy can be a path to earnings and wealth. This led to the contrary view that one did not require high literacy to be a successful entrepreneur; because such a person could always buy in other people with literacy skills.

Others linked literacy to life, rather than financial enrichment. Exploiting the 'fishing' theme, one speaker claimed the 'armchair fisherman' could, with the aid of a book and the imagination, go anywhere without enduring the fisherman's physical exertions. Another said that only literacy (or literature) could transform the physicality of fishing into art and culture.

In several instances, speakers could not imagine civilisation as we know it without literacy. 'In fact, without literacy there would be no recorded history,' said one, while another offered, 'Literacy enables us to understand and interpret from the past, and through this we work towards achievements for the future.'

There was a contrary perspective that literacy might just as easily negate culture and civilisation. Thus, a society's gain of literacy would imply the loss of its storytelling tradition and oral transmission of culture. It might undermine time-honoured manual crafts, not replacing them with anything as valuable. 'Reading and writing was associated with the rise of civilisation,' one conceded, but this also led to 'governments, hierarchies, armies, [and] bureaucracy'.

Despite the drawbacks of literacy, its defenders saw it as the only way to secure the future, or to prevent the breakdown of civilised communications and the political system.

Literacy was seen to confer numerous social participation, or even social survival, benefits. The literate could take part in the 'great conversation' of society, but also make an informed consumer's decision not to partake of less worthy things in society.

If not literate, an individual would lack the power to understand and participate in democracy, or the knowledge to see clearly through political wiles and 'trickery'. A darker view was that literacy was not a cornerstone of democracy or equality, but more about 'who gets control over what is written and what is read'.

Extending the ideas of democratic inclusion or exclusion, literacy was related to status and class. High literacy, argued one participant, was a highbrow pursuit, almost 'un-Australian' in its nature. Another said bluntly that literacy and education were no guarantee against plain stupidity. The counter-view was put that literacy was unconnected with elitism, but merely a practical and necessary skill.

The kits reported that 46% of Australian adults lacked the literacy skills to cope with the modern world. Instead of reacting with alarm to this, some debaters suggested that if such a large percentage of people were surviving without it, perhaps literacy was irrelevant.

For most of history, it was noted, literacy was a skill possessed by only a few, yet this did not mean those with low literacy lacked vital experience and knowledge. While educated speakers could attack the relevance of literacy in eloquent terms, others who had actually had to take adult literacy classes spoke highly for the self-esteem they had gained.

These debates provide a window into Australian perceptions of literacy, revealing 'a prevailing view that, despite some acknowledgement of the multiple and flexible nature of literacy, to be literate is the fundamental ability to read and write.' While this connects in the minds of participants with the 'enrichment of life, material advancement or social status', it also connects with the highbrow or the academic pursuit, which is 'not always seen as a good thing'.

The Parthenon was not built out of fish, a synopsis of the Adult Learner's Week 2003 Great Literacy Debates by John Cross, can be downloaded from
<<http://www.ala.asn.au>>

Flexible learning takes boy-from-the-bush from tradesman to engineer

Darren Smith is a Production Engineer with international manufacturing company, Schefenacker Vision Systems in Adelaide. For the past two years Darren has received three hours a week of face-to-face training at the company's production plant from his training facilitator, Ms Barbara Roszkowski, an Advanced Skills Lecturer in Mechanical Engineering from nearby Onkaparinga Institute of TAFE.

When Barbara isn't physically located at the plant, which produces automobile components, she is available to Darren and six of his colleagues 24 hours a day, seven days a week, via email.

Darren and his colleagues are one of the first groups of manufacturing industry employees in Australia to study formal vocational education and training (VET) qualifications totally in the workplace, rather than in the classroom, using a new model of work based learning. He's now half-way to becoming a formally qualified engineer, with both a Diploma of Engineering and an Advanced Diploma of Engineering under his belt.

Darren's trainer is pushing him to keep striving towards his original goals of becoming a fully qualified engineer and also teaching at TAFE.

Like Darren, most of Schefenacker's tradespeople left school early, pursued an apprenticeship and today are in their late 20s and early 30s feeling, in Ross's words, like 'fish out of water' as the demands of the manufacturing industry push them to use skills they weren't originally taught.

Darren left school in Year 11 and gave up life on the farm to take up his electrical apprenticeship. Back then, he honed his practical electrical techniques on the plant, and then hit the books during a three month block. It was a classic apprenticeship model.

Today, Darren has been promoted to a more senior position and, as a Production Engineer, is one of a team of four responsible for any production issues that regularly arise. To spell it out simply, he no longer focuses just on 'bits' but on how lots of bits fit together. He's a problem solver with excellent people skills. One

of his current projects is identifying ways to reduce machinery down-time to increase production, and therefore revenue.

So, why exactly does one of the world's leading manufacturers—it has production plants located in more than a dozen countries around the world, employs around 740 people at its Adelaide plant alone and in 2002 took out the top honour at Standards Australia's Business Excellence Awards—decide to invest in training for trade staff like Darren?

According to Schefenacker's Corporate Development Manager, Dr Ross Bensley, Schefenacker's corporate philosophy is to 'grow and develop its people'. In a positive move for the manufacturing industry in Australia, the company has initiated an alliance with other manufacturing companies, local high schools, a number of TAFEs (including the Onkaparinga Institute of TAFE SA) and three universities (including the University of SA) in an attempt to put in place a range of training reforms urgently needed by the manufacturing industry.

National Advisor on VET for the Manufacturing Industry, Mr Bob Paton, supports Schefenacker's move to help its manufacturing staff acquire new skills: 'Future needs for training in the manufacturing industry will be met best through training providers working closely with enterprises. The flexibility that's on offer through the Australian Flexible Learning Framework (Framework) is certainly wide and varied and is designed to suit a range of situations.'

Established in 2000, the Framework is a five year national strategy by all States and Territories and the Australian Government to make training more flexible and to achieve a shared vision to create a skilled Australian workforce.

Schefenacker's Ross Bensley agrees that traditional hands-on trade tasks are simply no longer needed within a modern advanced manufacturing context. 'Or, where they are, this is only a small part of the total role, which has evolved from requiring a tradesperson to today requiring a technician or a para professional. What that says is there is a datedness about the competency sets in which they were first trained.'

The challenge facing manufacturing industry tradespeople is they either keep operating

within their original skills set and face increasing marginalisation and inevitable redundancy, or they embark on an education and training program that will move them beyond the traditional confines of the trade. Fortunately for Darren and his colleagues, Schefenacker aspires to be a trail-blazer in the area of work-based training.

'If we are going to be doing these things, in these countries, providing these products, then as a company what kind of capabilities do we need to have? We need to anticipate technology and equipment, but we also need to anticipate what kinds of knowledge and skill sets people need if they are going to operate in a system that is capable of delivering these sorts of outcomes.'

The Australian Flexible Learning Framework supports an innovative work-based training model for adult learners.

While Schefenacker was busy exploring its training options, Onkaparinga Institute of TAFE SA was busy developing its own philosophy. Darren's trainer successfully applied for funding and support from the Framework in 2003 to develop a new project centred learning model that is ideal for delivering and assessing formal training packages in the workplace.

'Basically, I felt frustrated that VET didn't seem to be accommodating the learning needs of adult learners and was applying the same teaching practices to both young and mature age learners,' Barbara says. 'With the funding and support from the Framework, I was able to develop a new training model to deliver post-trade qualifications. Schefenacker saw the model and was impressed. It was the alternative that industry was looking for, because the existing education strategies in universities and VET do not generally cope with the changing needs of manufacturing enterprises, which must compete in the global marketplace. Therefore, our responses to educational needs must be much swifter. Project centred learning is one of the strategies that allows meaningful learning in a context that is directly relevant to industry.'

'Industry needs agility in education and training, so that it can be delivered 'just-in-time' and is within a timeframe that is aligned with technological advance.' As a result, Barbara's model of work-based training was offered to a handful of Schefenacker's trade employees, who were encouraged to work in teams to facilitate group learning—a skill that was vital for their professional development.

'The work with Barbara has been extremely worthwhile because it's given us a capability that we didn't have before and created a

pathway we didn't previously have and so we expect now that there will be a steady flow of people who will be able to do what these seven staff members have done,' Ross said.

'The Framework funding and support enabled Barbara to put the bulk of her time into developing the model and the process, and designing the course delivery. So while work-based training was something we wanted to do, it was Barbara's model that allowed us to introduce it quickly. Without this model, the training probably would have happened, but it would have taken much longer and I don't think it would have anywhere near the quality that we now have.'

'Research shows that the life cycle for a training or academic qualifications is around five years.'

While managing corporate learning is a strategic imperative for Schefenacker, they deliberately chose not to go down the path of becoming a registered training organisation (RTO). Ross's rationale is that training is not the company's core business. 'In addition to our mature age tradespeople, we've also now got 350 young people who go through an integrated Certificate I and II program in high schools. It's a VET program that is an interface between schools and industry, with the majority of learning taking place in schools. It gives students exposure to seven different pathways within manufacturing which they can do in Years 10, 11 and 12. We're creating a seamless transition from school, into work, into TAFE, and then into university, depending on which pathway they pursue.'

As for mature age tradespeople like Darren, the pathway is now open for them to move from wiring circuits to becoming qualified mechanical engineers. Professional evolutions must be matched by training revolutions

'Wherever there is an evolution taking place in professional roles, there needs to be a matching revolution in the way you train people, both in terms of content and methodology. We no longer want people sitting in classrooms doing 600 hours of training,' Ross said.

Further Information

This article has been provided courtesy of the Australian Flexible Learning Framework. To subscribe to the Framework's monthly online newsletter go to:

www.flexiblelearning.net.au/flexe-news

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