



## National literacy award winners

**F**ive exceptional individuals were honoured recently at the 2004 Minister's Awards for Outstanding Contribution to Improving Literacy and/or Numeracy. Each of them has made a major contribution to the development of literacy in their community. They will each receive \$10,000 to further their work.

These awards, now in their second year, are open to people working in a wide variety of literacy and numeracy forums from early childhood through to schools and adult education. They are an integral part of National Literacy and Numeracy Week (NLNW) which is held in September.

The five winners are: Ms Yvonne Clarke, Mr Alistair McIntosh, Ms Anja Tait, Ms Margaret

McCallum and Ms Jenness Warin. The last two named worked with adults and are of particular interest to *Literacy Link*.

**Ms Margaret McCallum** joined the Committee of Bright Adult Education Inc. in 1996. In her role as Voluntary Literacy Coordinator Ms McCallum saw how difficult it was for people in isolated rural communities to access the literacy services they needed. Through her leadership and commitment the 'Words on Wheels' (WOW) project was developed—a two-year pilot providing a mobile tutoring service to rural communities. This program continues to deliver a range of literacy programs throughout the Alpine Shire in Victoria. In 2003 the success of the Words on Wheels project was recognised *continued over*

## New faces at ACAL

**N**ew office bearers were elected at the ACAL Annual General Meeting (AGM), held during the national adult literacy conference in September. They are Pauline O'Maley and Jan Hagston, who jointly hold the position of President, Robyn Jay, Secretary, and Lorraine Sushames, Treasurer.



*Pauline O'Maley (left) and Jan Hagston (right) recently elected ACAL Co-Presidents*

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We would also like to welcome new state representatives (see ACAL contact details on page 16) and to express our appreciation of the work done by those who retired at the AGM or during the year: Suzanne Bozorth-Baines (Treasurer), Geraldine Castleton (Past President), Pat Hazell (NSW), Lois McManus (WA), Sheila O'Leary-Woodhouse (Tas) and Ann Brown (SA).

Particular thanks go to Jim Thompson, the outgoing ACAL President, whose leadership and expertise significantly contributed to the development of ACAL's strategic approach to adult literacy.

The next 12 months will continue to be challenging for ACAL and we look forward to further developing the strategic work that has been undertaken over the past year.

through the award of the Victorian Adult Community and Further Education's Most Outstanding Program Award.

Ms McCallum was nominated by Mrs Linda Meighan, Coordinator of Bright Adult Education Inc. Ms McCallum will use the award money to expand the Words on Wheels program.

**Ms Jenness Warin** has worked as the Workplace English Language and Literacy Tutor for the Laynhapuy Homeland Association Inc. in the NT for the past four years. She has taken an innovative approach to teaching literacy and numeracy in the remote Homelands of East Arnhemland. She travels to the Homelands and teaches literacy in a small-business context, providing programs which address the real needs of the community. Elders are enlisted to mentor younger people,

an approach which respects the tribal structure as well as meeting the challenges of the new generations. Ms Warin helped win a grant for broadband satellite-equipped communications stations that are now set up and operating in four remote Homelands. As a result of her work many Indigenous people are now able to access services and participate in the broader community in ways which had not previously been open to them.

Ms Warin was nominated by Jonetani Rika, Homelands Development Coordinator and colleague. She will use the award money to expand the use of IT to support literacy and numeracy development, to train local community members to teach other communities and to research the uptake and effects of digital communication in relation to improvements in adult literacy and numeracy in remote communities.

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## ACAL Conference 2004—report

**T**here were 277 registrations for the conference held in Melbourne 10–11 September. Just over half were Victorians but all States, and even New Zealand, were represented. The conference website had over 6,000 visitors, who made 10,286 visits with around two-thirds of registrations making their initial registration online. The conference 'call for papers' and registration forms were available on the Internet and in print form, and were circulated widely and in a timely manner. The design elements were carried over into the program, the website and correspondence and people commented on the 'Four Seasons Tree' in the foyer.

The NCVER and DEST forum preceding the conference proved to be a good 'warm up' and Friday's program picked up on some of the themes that emerged. The keynote speakers set the scene each day and the performance on Saturday brought energy and laughter. We felt that the Focus sessions enabled people to

engage with some of the broader issues as well as with research and projects. The Network sessions were partially successful in that we had an LLNP network spontaneously form in the foyer and each of the scheduled network meetings was quite well attended. The time was probably not adequate and this aspect of the conference program could be further developed. It is such a good opportunity to find out what is happening around Australia in particular areas and to raise issues for ACAL.

The Melbourne Museum was a delightful venue for the conference dinner and we thank them for their co-operation. The Arch Nelson address was presented with panache and people enjoyed the opportunity to engage in the trivial pursuit questions.

The CD of conference papers included in the 'green bag' meant that people could take with them most of the material presented at the conference. Additional material will become available on the website on October 1st, not only saving trees but ensuring availability for those who missed out on attending.

Thank you to all those who attended and to presenters who gave their time. Thanks to Don MacDowall for his attention to detail and patience. Thanks, too, to the conference planning committee, the ACAL executive and the VALBEC committee who all worked to contribute to the success of the conference and who sang so beautifully (but should not give up their day jobs!)

*Lynne Matheson  
2004 Conference Convenor*



*Jim Thompson (ACAL Immediate Past President), Lynne Matheson (VALBEC President), Dr Ursula Howard (UK—keynote speaker) and Rosie Wickert (ACAL executive co-opted member) at the recent National Adult Literacy Conference.*

*This article outlines a presentation made at the 2004 National Adult Literacy Conference. The presenters, from the Learning Skills Unit at RMIT University, have a special interest in extending the face-to-face teaching of the physical classroom into the online environment, and in challenging the boundaries of traditional classrooms and their discourses. The complete presentation is available at [www.valbec.org.au/acalconf/presentations.html](http://www.valbec.org.au/acalconf/presentations.html)*

Our joint research examines the development and negotiation of discourse in two different online learning environments. One, using a group 'blog' as a discussion board and chat room, was created to encourage adult Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) learners to continue the classroom dialogue outside the classroom; the other, using the more structured format of Blackboard, was the main classroom and meeting place for a post-graduate course for teachers and trainers.

*'Hi, everybody! It's so nice to push away the walls of our classroom! Do you feel yourself in the universe?'* Student comments like this one bring life to the whole experience of online learning, and validate educators' attempts to introduce it into the classroom.

We all know that the number of people who use the internet both at work and in their studies has increased rapidly. In Australia, there is therefore a very real need for teachers to develop online teaching skills, and to learn how to blend these with their face-to-face teaching. Britton (1970) pointed out that language learning is most successful when it is a form of play. Adult learners find it difficult to play—they are afraid of looking awkward. The two discussion boards which provided the basis for this study offered contrasting opportunities for 'play.'

Each discussion board formed part of a whole, far larger curriculum, and the focus of each program was obviously very different. In TALON the online discussion formed just one aspect of

an entire online course which was designed for teachers and trainers who had some experience in writing traditional learning materials and were experienced computer users, and who wanted to examine the issues involved in putting learning materials on the Web. Because the course was conducted wholly online, the discussion forum was the main 'meeting place' for participants—and, although serious concerns were raised here, it was also possible to enjoy challenging different viewpoints in a context that was by definition informal.

**Blackboard**—an online classroom technology which enables the teacher to design an e-learning course with Web pages and discussion areas. It is a closed learning environment that can be accessed by any Web browser and participants have their own password for secure access. A free trial can be downloaded from: [www.blackboard.com](http://www.blackboard.com)

**Blog**—short for 'web log'—a log or journal on the web. Most blogs now are made on free sites such as [www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com) where it takes about ten minutes to get your own website launched. You receive an internet address (referred to as a URL) for your site. You can then access your site from any computer, anywhere in the world. Blogging is fast; it's fun. It's a 'no frills' way to introduce technology into the reading and writing classroom.

The web log discussion board was used with a class of Language Frameworks students, and

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

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was originally intended to give students a meaningful way of understanding computer literacy and using the Internet. This particular group of students was diverse in terms of language acquisition, age, educational background, perceived ability, and academic and social acculturation. They came to the blog with no expectations other than that it must be fun, and in that spirit they began experimenting with different language forms immediately.

With TALON, it soon became obvious that the most successful discussions were those with a particular focus and which were related to course assessment. A guest speaker was invited into the classroom as moderator to lead a discussion over a limited time of one week. The students responded to the immediacy of the task. For preparation the participants were asked to find online courses that they felt were good examples of online learning and bring them to the discussion. The time frame created an additional novelty since the guest speaker was writing from England; participants awoke each day to his new messages—

*Hi everyone. It's the end of my working day, Tuesday 4:20 pm. I figure if I post a message now, I will get the first word. So here goes.*

*I should say that, although I am suggesting some areas to think about below, I don't want to limit the agenda in any way. Feel free to raise what you want to raise. But please take pity on me. These 'guest speaker' gigs are difficult for the guest. There are many of you and just one of me.*

*OK, here're some thoughts to get the ball rolling...*

The guest speaker sets up the 'rules' for the discussion and for the relationship he will have with the participants. In this way he reveals 'strategic thinking about his role as a tutor.' (McConnell 2003) The pattern he suggests at the beginning he adheres to for the duration of the discussion. He states his prejudices and his preferences and cites Crook (2002) and Breen (2002) to illustrate his points about 'blended learning'. The participants were stimulated by his ease with the medium and his obvious wealth of knowledge, and were prompted to seek answers for their own projects.

The web log discussion board formed an interesting contrast: the teacher's introduction was brief, chatty and invited the students to their own site—

*This is your chat page—all of you from L.F.! I thought I'd set it up so that on Friday you can start chatting. It's pretty late at night so I'm going to log-off now. Speak to you Friday! Jane.*

There were 16 students in the group, from 12 different countries, and their ages ranged from 20 to 67. Two had been in Australia for over 20 years; two had been here for only a few months. Three were overseas-qualified professionals with a fairly sophisticated command of English, while at least five other members of the group had completed no formal education at all.

These students were enrolled in a 'Language Frameworks' course which has the explicit aim of improving English listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. This course is deliberately flexible, which lent itself especially well to the use of the blog. There was a need for continued contact with other students outside the classroom, for extended 'whole language' learning, as well as an expressed student need for increased time using computers. The blog provided an opportunity for extending language and literacy skills, for practising computer skills, for learning to read and write on a web site, and for exploring the Internet, through 'real' tasks. The students felt they were working, and that these tasks were valuable.

The blog also provided a very important social meeting place—students shared moments of sadness and of elation. They discovered ways to address individuals and groups, and they developed friendships and continued conversations outside the actual classroom. The blog was student-centred in the simplest of ways—the students owned it.

In our conference presentation, we showed extracts from each discussion board. We introduced the different formats, and discussed the way each board functions. We selected entries which demonstrated the ways in which the participants interacted with the moderator and with each other. We looked at the personal styles that developed; the way in which some participants 'lurked' and watched for a while before entering; the growing sense of an online community, and the changing and evolving discourse.

We would like to encourage other teachers to gain as much pleasure as we have done from introducing students to the concept of 'talking with their fingers'! (Hawkridge, Morgan and Jelfs, 1997). We had hoped that our presentation would be interactive, and it was. We were asked to set up a blog and were delighted that so many people wanted to trial what we had been discussing. Please visit it at <http://www.ACAL2004.blogspot.com> and, if you would like to join those of us who are already blogging, send us an email.

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# Building skills for Indigenous governance

by Cathrena McRae

This has been a watershed year for Australia's Indigenous people. Indigenous programs are now administered by mainstream agencies, under a 'whole-of-government' approach. In the States, Territories and regions, multi-agency Indigenous Coordination Centres (ICCs) have been established, managed by an Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination (OIPC) within the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs. Indigenous organisations providing services will have to deliver on their obligations under reformed funding arrangements that focus on outcome. Program guidelines will be more flexible, inviting innovation. Improved accountability, performance monitoring and reporting are part of the new arrangements.

This new reality has its roots in recent reports and studies into the sustainable development of Indigenous communities, which point to a raft of issues in need of attention, including literacy and numeracy. *Partners in a Learning Culture*, Australia's National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Strategy for Vocational Education & Training 2000-2005, published by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) is a core document underpinning new Indigenous policy development. According to ANTA, 'Indigenous people are disadvantaged Australians ... (with) far less access to ongoing lifelong learning than other Australians'. This disadvantage is a consequence of:

- Lower income—Indigenous people in the 25-44 age group have a weekly median income of \$265 compared to \$437 for all Australians in the same group. Low income restricts both access to VET and opportunity for further professional development.
- The 'Stolen Generations'—10% of Indigenous adults aged 25 and over were removed from their natural family during childhood. The consequence of this dislocation, magnified by the close Indigenous family and community ties are immense.
- Poor literacy and numeracy skills. It is critical that VET accommodates different levels of literacy and numeracy. Training and education providers need to operate in environments that complement, are sensitive to and affirm cultures, multi-literacies and first languages.
- Geographic and social isolation. The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey (ABS 1995) established that 64% of Indigenous people in rural areas live more than 50 kms from the nearest TAFE College. This dispersion requires the delivery of VET

which is both culturally appropriate and flexible. New technologies offer significant potential in helping to redress inequitable access. The educational disadvantage experienced by Indigenous Australians is evidenced through minimal formal education and low levels of literacy and numeracy (ANTA 2003).

Dodson and Smith (2003) in their paper *Governance for Sustainable Development* emphasised that effective governance training is a key ingredient in supporting Indigenous self reliance.

In response to the new realities, The VET sector developed BSB 40901 Certificate IV in Business (Governance), a qualification designed to meet the needs of Indigenous governing committee members, to support self management and assist with organisational capacity building.

This 13 unit Certificate (8 core units with 5 electives) can be difficult to achieve, since no qualification exists below it. Certificate IV demands a level of prior training which Indigenous board members with low levels of literacy and numeracy, with minimal formal education and fewer computer skills do not have. Nor does the Certificate IV take into account the disadvantage related to geographic isolation of Indigenous people in rural Australia, and lack of resources resulting from that.

The *Windara* Project was developed in response to the findings above, and to new government directions and initiatives.

Sue Muller and myself, directors of The Learning Workshop, the Cairns-based Literacy Provider, were looking for a tool to improve the literacy and numeracy skills of Indigenous board members to enable them to run their organisations more effectively. Out of this need we developed *Windara*, a storytelling-based CD-ROM about a fictitious Indigenous community in south east Queensland.

We focused on improving the level of literacy and overcoming geographic isolation as the best ways to bridge the gap between existing competencies and the level or prior training necessary to achieve Certificate IV, Building Skills for Indigenous Governance.

At *Windara*, the Community Health Service





Governing Committee develops several key processes—how to plan for organisational needs; how to use the constitution and how to manage a board meeting—three processes embracing three of the core units of Certificate IV.

Interactively, learners are taken through the process of reviewing *Windara's* strategic plan, and developing a new constitution which is then passed by a governing committee.

To test the effectiveness of the CD, field trials were conducted in diverse Indigenous communities and organisations. Trial participants were asked to navigate the CD and to record their impressions. Their feedback indicated that *Windara* helped to develop literacy skills, was culturally appropriate, at the right level, interesting and fun.

Wider product usage however is needed to fully evaluate the CD's effectiveness. *Windara* has been a lengthy and challenging process, which is not surprising, when you consider the essen-

tials necessary for the product to succeed:

- There was a lot of information which had to be incorporated.
- Every competency level is complex, mirroring the complexities of organisational governance and this CD covers three competencies.
- It had to address all the elements of competency—yet it could not be a learning guide.
- It had to be culturally appropriate and reflect the integrated nature of governance learning.

*Windara* is funded under the 2003 ANTA Adult Literacy National Project by the Commonwealth through the Department of Education, Science and Training.

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## *Literacy Link*—invitation to contributors

**T**he editorial committee of *Literacy Link* is seeking articles from literacy and numeracy practitioners that reflect good practice, or which spotlight a particular provider, program or research project.

*Literacy Link* is the newsletter of the Australian Council of Adult Literacy (ACAL). It is a 16 page newsletter produced six times per year. It is circulated nationally to over 1800 adult literacy and numeracy researchers, policy makers and providers.

*Literacy Link* features news items that affect the field, including policy changes and commentary, forthcoming professional development events, information from DEST and ANTA as well as contributions from practitioners. *Literacy Link* also provides contact details of state and territory associations. *Literacy Link* does not include advertising.

Note that *Literacy Link* is not a refereed research journal for academic consumption—it is a newsletter mainly read by practitioners and others working in the literacy or numeracy field. With this in mind, its focus is on readability.

Articles are usually one or two pages—up to say 1600 words. Because we are a national newsletter, we are also happy to republish your existing material if, for example, it has only been seen by readers in your own state. You might also include literacy or numeracy *teach-*

*ing materials* that have been developed with your specific project in mind. These can be an additional couple of pages and are usually reproduced 'as is' so that readers get a sample of good practice in materials development. They might even use this material in their own classes.

Photos, graphics, charts &c are well received. Photos should depict a diverse range of people (in terms of sex and cultural background) involved in interesting activities. Be sure you have permission from the subject to reproduce their image for publication. (Take care with images taken straight from the Web—they are usually low resolution and too blurry for publication.)

Send copy as an email attachment (MS Word or similar) to the editor at—

*dickson@labyrinth.net.au*

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*Literacy Link*

*1 Abinger Street*

*Richmond, Victoria 3121*

# Birmingham's aspiration to become a 'learning city' has lessons for Australia

Geoff Bateson (UK)

*In July 2004 ACAL and Adult Learning Australia invited Geoff Bateson to Australia to describe some of the journey that Birmingham, England, has made in trying to drive up levels of language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) for all ages via all organisations in the city i.e., taking a 'whole-Birmingham' approach. Geoff also described how the development work to improve adult LLN outcomes in the city was interacting with the more recent national whole-of-government developments.*

Ten years ago the state of learning was such that two-thirds of children entered secondary school with a low skills set, meaning they were unlikely to be able to really get to grips with the secondary school curriculum. One result of this was a 20-25% 'success rate' at age 16, in terms of school leavers having the levels of language, numeracy and literacy skills to underpin their transferable employability across into their first job and on into subsequent jobs or promotions. Whilst 9,000 adults were in basic skills classes, with around 3,000 substantially making progress each year, the entry of an equivalent number of underachieving school leavers into the 'pot' meant that the overall size of the adult problem remained the same year in, year out.

There was a realisation that Birmingham's ambition to be a forward-moving city was being held back by the 'drag effects' of low levels of basic skills. Existing mechanisms to bring about change (annual development bids; fragmentary attempts at being 'innovative'; short term funding; disconnected developments even across different parts of the same organisation, let alone across different organisations; 'either/or' arguments about educational approaches; focusing on processes, meetings, ownerships, structures etc) had got us to where we were, and so were not going to be the solution. A totally new approach had to be tried out.

In 1995 the major education and training bodies across the city signed up to working in *partnership* and to having *joint* development money sitting behind a *jointly* agreed annual business plan. All of this was ambitious and innovative at the time. The approach is now also being used at regional level (an English region covers around 6 or 7 million people). The national 'Skills for Life' adult basic skills strategy introduced in 2001 similarly takes a cross-cabinet, whole-government approach.

In all cases the purpose is to ensure that larger numbers of learners get ready access to an appropriate, high quality service whichever part of the system they find themselves in and they then can expect to make progress. Previously

the variability between providers was too great; learners were far from guaranteed any substantial outcome to their learning, and moving from one bit of the system to another could easily mean the learner disappearing down the gulfs, or being endlessly re-assessed by different organisations.

The realisation that the partner organisations couldn't solve their problems alone, and the commitment to get real about finding a way of productive working in partnership that would focus on maximising change and keeping procedural structures to an absolute minimum, was begun in a different political climate to the one that exists now. The work was started before any national school literacy or numeracy strategies; before the election of the current government; at a time when publicly funded organisations were often being defined as the problem rather than the solution; when some historical funding was being shifted onto more modern agendas (but coming across as 'cuts') and so on.

The original 'start-off' long-term development resources were gained by redefining an area-based regeneration budget as being applicable to the regeneration of people (through higher skills etc) rather than simply assuming that it only applied to physical regeneration. The Partnership made rapid success early on. Reflecting on why it was able to be so effective from the beginning has highlighted a few elements (that are adaptable to other developmental contexts):

- The partners were able to bring about large-scale change to parts of the education/learning infrastructure. They were the organisations responsible for running chunks of the system; their chief executives and leaders met as a strategic board 3-4 times a year. The senior managers of these organisations then came together to put together the annual business plan and to make sure that their own teams and own delivery mechanisms were best placed to respond.
- A system of loose 'attachments' of

development workers, for a small proportion of their time, to the Partnership meant that the partner organisations had a direct mechanism for discussions with each other, on a day-to-day basis, about what ideas each was thinking of. This was vital since the Partnership was intended not to take on a life of its own, but to operate by influencing the ways the various partners planned and delivered their mainstream services.

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*'In just a couple of years the literacy levels of 2—3% of the Birmingham population have lifted by one level.'*

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- The focus was kept on changing how people did their existing jobs and what supports and challenges they needed to be able to successfully make changes. Initially these were mostly 'education workers' i.e. school teachers and support staff; college and adult education teachers and learner-support people; but soon included librarians; staff of preschool groups; probation service staff; health service workers; people in social benefit and work-linked offices etc.
- The other dimension to focusing on change was to keep stressing that we were engaged in development activity, i.e., were a Development Partnership. Reports to the Board mentioned money only in passing – the focus was on 'change' and on 'getting there'.
- The business planning against the same strategic objectives meant that, although the emphasis may change from year to year, rapid progress would be made across a broad set of fronts, in ways that went faster, deeper, wider than any partner organisation on their own could manage.

The scale of the task was set as challenging as possible whilst still being just at the edge of being realistically feasible. For example, the task around adult basic skills was to halve the problem over the ten years from 2000 to 2010. The 140,000 adults with low levels of basic skills would be reduced to 70,000. This would be achievable if we reduced the 'flow' in from schools by working to double the success rate of school leavers (which we did); by doubling the number of adults working seriously on the gaps in their spiky profile of basic skills (which we have more than achieved); and by improving the achievements on courses (which we are currently doing).

70,000 felt like an unmanageable number, but over 10 years it meant 7,000 'successes' per year. The types of people likely to have low

basic skills were known, as were the programs designed to meet these needs. Breaking the 7,000 down into groups and looking at how individuals progressed through the various programs, most relevant to those groups, made the whole thing feel much more do-able.

We needed ever more reliable and ever more dis-aggregated data and that was something we put energy and resources into. Analysing this data has helped us be more and more specific about what needs accelerating, for what groups of people, in which locations across the city – which has helped pinpoint the agencies already engaged with those learners and the most appropriate responses to make.

In some cases this has led to clarifying the roles (signposting to other provision; doing initial assessments; meeting people's needs but not necessarily by direct teaching etc.) that staff can play in housing, in libraries, in community groups etc. Some of the work has been practical (producing helpful checklists or exemplars; confirming the roles already played; pointing out the gaps and the things that might be done); some of the work was more on attitudes and assumptions (unravelling that adult learners mostly didn't mind assessment and achievement, if done properly; lifting the definition of adult basic skills to mean much, much more than being equated with learners who are likely to make fairly slow progress to focus on the larger numbers who may need a rapid, intensive, focused brush up on specific, neutral skills).

Considerable progress has been made:

- literacy levels are climbing—halving the need by 2010 is quite feasible
- numeracy is a huge problem—larger need; few classes; very few skilled teachers etc.—but we're focusing on it
- basic skills work has a high profile—and in many ways is leading the way
- literacy, language and numeracy have been built into a range of other developments and is included in the long term Community Plan for the area
- literacy and numeracy have been connected to the progress to be made if Birmingham is to aspire to be a learning city and if it is to raise the levels in particular neighbourhoods.

All of this is exciting stuff—but challenging—and necessary, which is what keeps us going and why we are happy to exchange ideas with others as much as possible.

Geoff Bateson  
Partnership Manager, Birmingham Core Skills  
Development Partnership  
[www.coreskills.co.uk](http://www.coreskills.co.uk)



# North bound train—WELL training that works

by Wing-Yin Chan Lee & Lyn Hunter

Workplace Education of Adelaide Institute of TAFE has been working in partnership with Orrcon, the third largest manufacturer and distributor of steel tubing in Australia, to develop and trial a dynamic and innovative training model, which we labelled 'North Bound Train' under the Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) program in the last two years. 'North Bound Train' sets out with the ambitious aim of 'bridging the gaps between an organisation and its employees by bringing everyone on board to find the purpose, set the directions and shape the destiny of the organisation'.

To validate the outcomes of the program, we invited Mr Nick Conley, Operations Manager of the Orrcon SA Precision Tubing Plant to share his views with us. What he has written is solid proof of the significant benefits that a series of WELL training programs could provide for the employees, organisation and industry:

*'The benefits to the company due to training are two-fold as I can see it. Firstly there is the development of the employees so they reach their potential, and there are also the effects that the training has on improving the performance of the machines on site as well.'*

Nick went on to use two examples to show the benefits of training on the Orrcon SA site.

## Example 1

Sam (not his real name for confidentiality reasons—he is part Aboriginal) has been working at Orrcon for over 15 years. He has worked in a number of departments, but it is fair to say that Orrcon management have seen rapid improvement in Sam's performance since Workplace Education of Adelaide Institute of TAFE has been involved in WELL training at Orrcon. Sam has actively taken part in a series of 'Business Communication' courses and learned the skills of workplace assessors. Since the initial training, Sam has gone from a forklift driver to 'Continuous Improvement Team' member to 'Process Innovation Team' member to Area Coordinator of Cutting to Production Coordinator, all in a short period of time. The fast tracking of Sam through these various roles would not have been possible without the implementation of the WELL training. Orrcon would not have seen or even be able to recognise Sam's potential.

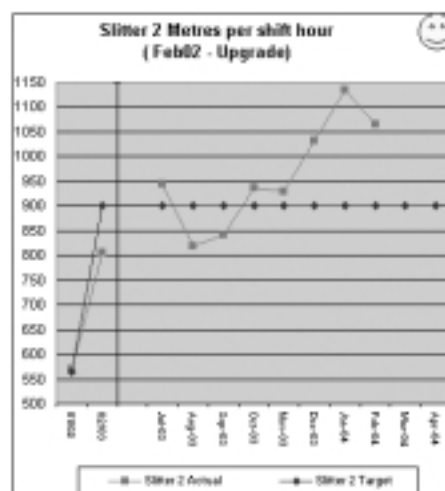
Sam is probably the best example on this site, but there are many others who are striving to reach the achievements of Sam. With the help of Workplace Education in conjunction with WELL programs, others can reach these heights, which provide Orrcon a considerable advantage in the ever-increasing global market

of steel tube manufacturing.

## Example 2

With an increased understanding of communication on the part of the employees comes the responsibility for management to maintain communication and provide feedback to all employees on the performance of the various production departments.

Several years ago Orrcon upgraded its slitting machine to ensure that we were providing quality slit steel to the tube mills. Basically steel arrives on our site in 1200mm widths weighing anywhere from 7 to 11 tonnes. The slitters reduce the steel down to a width to manufacture tube. For a period of four months after the upgrade we were unable to produce this slit steel at much more than 750 metres per shift hour. However with the use of two personnel trained in the language and literacy course that supported the Certificate IV Assessment and Workplace Training, we were to train the slitters, who carried out a series of brainstorming sessions to lift the production to over 1100 metres per shift hour (see graph below).



The important factor was not only the roles of the trainers, but the fact that the employees had attended the Business of Communication

course conducted by Lyn Hunter. They warmed to the skills of communication and the thought processes required to carry out brainstorming sessions. That is why they were able to understand what was required even given that people in this department were from different cultural backgrounds.

As with many workplaces, Orrcon has in the past four years undergone major changes: merging and amalgamation, investment from a foreign company, consolidation of its market position in its traditional products while expanding to new products and services and overseas markets. These changes would have been incredibly disruptive and difficult without the involvement of Workplace Education

As for its employees, with the change of their environment, the nature of their work also changes. The most obvious challenge is for the communication skills of the operators. When the company consolidated middle management positions, greater demands were placed on the roles of the operators. Many of these new roles are not foreign to other enterprises, for example giving and receiving instructions to implement, monitor and report on manufacturing procedures and compliance with policies and legislative requirements. But it is a real challenge for our company with its employees being predominately male, 30% from NESB. Most are aged between 25 and 45 years and are early school leavers with long-term literacy and numeracy needs.

When Adelaide Institute of TAFE was invited to work out training solutions for the company, the main challenge was to link the workforce to the mission of the company. The company's corporate objectives are:

- *'Teamwork—everyone works as a team'*—how could this happen when most operators work in isolation with earmuffs on the production line?
- *'Commitment—everyone pulls their weight'*—how could this happen when majority of the operators are early school leavers, with language, literacy and numeracy needs and lack the confidence and skills to communicate?
- *'Value employees as everyone is the company's internal customer'*—how can the company motivate the operators with low confidence and self esteem to move forward to be future company leaders even if they have demonstrated the required skills?

With the help of WELL funding, Adelaide Institute of TAFE put forward a training

proposal, using the concept of 'North Bound Train', a symbol that the whole organisation can relate to, to promote a whole-of-organisation approach to training. Its analogy and rationale are that trains are made of steel; north bound is heading for the market direction that the company is aiming at and everyone within the organisation needs to be on board the train. Most importantly, training is a journey, during which everyone can share his or her experience and expectation of the destination—where will we be at the end of the training?

By integrating communication skills with a range of metal engineering competency standards, we have shown the extensive use of communication and generic skills underpinning a holistic training approach. The evidence quoted by the Operations Manager above demonstrated that as LLN practitioners, we could translate a national Training Package into something meaningful to disengaged groups of learners and re-engage them in the learning process.

We have proved that learning could provide a career opportunity that had not previously been considered possible by workers and their employers. We have demonstrated to a company that machinery could be of secondary importance while its people, the key asset of any organisation, could turn machinery into a meaningful and productive tool. Investment in its people was critical for bringing the employers and employees together for organisational long-term growth and sustainability.

Orrcon has gone through a long journey in its training and development. At this stage, the training model developed in South Australia is heading north to the organisation's head office in Brisbane and the Oil and Gas Pipe plant at Wollongong. Moreover, we are confident in claiming that everyone within the organisation is able to communicate and contribute to 'finding the purpose, setting the directions and shaping the destiny of the organisation'.

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# ► ADULT LITERACY RESEARCH

## A fair go: Factors impacting on vocational education and training participation and completion in ethnic communities

Judith Miralles

► **THIS REPORT INVESTIGATES** the participation and awareness of vocational education and training (VET) in six ethnic communities. It also looks at whether English as a second language programs provide adequate pathways to vocational education and training, and analyses English proficiency and cultural expectations in relation to course participation and completion.

Previous research indicates a low awareness and undervaluing of vocational education and training in ethnic communities. It also shows that there is dissatisfaction with the generality of English language training, and an over-representation of English as a second language students in VET multi-field courses, such as language, preparatory and access courses. In addition, there is low ethnic participation in employment based training opportunities through traineeships and apprenticeships.

The language groups selected were Arabic, Bosnian, Cantonese, Spanish, Turkish and Vietnamese. These have large proportions of working adults, while representing varying settlement experiences and English language proficiencies.

The focus was working-age adults currently or prospectively participating in vocational education and training, not including multi-field. Sixty in-depth interviews with community intermediaries were followed by language focus groups with 140 adults in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland.

The research identified a number of factors which impact on participation in, and completion of, vocational education and training. It also highlighted a need to improve students' understanding of the range and portability of VET programs, and the different purposes they could serve.

Enrolment in vocational education and training is strengthened in programs that:

- provide clear pathways into employment
- provide language support
- acknowledge and address cultural issues
- have trainers who understand issues faced by trainees (cultural, language and settlement)
- acknowledge trainees' existing vocational skills
- include work experience in their training.

The research verified a generally low awareness and undervaluing of vocational education and training in ethnic communities (the exception in this case being Bosnian and Cantonese communities), widespread dissatisfaction with English as a second language programs, and little understanding of traineeships and apprenticeship opportunities.

The students' enrolment in vocational education and training linked strongly with an understanding of the range of programs available to them. The main purpose of their training was to get a job, and generally was not reconsidered once a job was found. Many adults were not keen for their children to attend vocational education and training. Young people and newer arrivals appeared to have greater confidence and willingness to participate.

Teachers were the most trusted sources of information on courses available to them. Local libraries and newspapers, and students' families and communities, were also preferred information sources, more than the ethnic media.

English as a second language programs disappointed many interviewees, who had not understood that the 510 hours of English instruction in the Adult Migrant English Program is insufficient for vocational proficiency. Nearly all took the view that English as a second language programs should systematically prepare students for the workforce, and criticised the inconsistent course and career advice they received.

The research highlighted the important role of VET trainers. Cross-culturally competent training and trainers were valued. These are those that manage the classroom culture sensitively, explain Australian cultural and workplace values, adapt training content for the tastes of other groups, and constructively use cultural diversity in training programs.

Most subjects believed they could successfully complete VET programs with only moderate English language skills, provided they received language support. They wanted English as a second language programs that were integrated with vocational education and training, or a 'one-stop shop' approach.

Work experience was considered vitally important, providing a practical means of gaining local vocational knowledge and an opportunity to create networks within one's profession. Research participants were keen to have their existing vocational skills acknowledged during training for, as many said, a lack of English language skills did not mean a lack of vocational competence.

Every group except the Cantonese was concerned about direct training costs and indirect costs through lost earnings. These cost pressures could be eased by proximity of training venues, access to public transport and availability of childcare.

#### ► Messages for policy and practice

There should be 'targeted and tailored' campaigns to inform ethnic communities of the range of VET programs, providers (including private providers) and pathways.

In VET campaigns, the value of traditional print and radio media should be assessed community by community; blanket coverage with electronic media is not recommended, and liaison with community leaders and workers is important.

Apprenticeships and traineeships especially should be promoted to ethnic communities, with a related need to integrate English language support for apprentices and trainees from non-English speaking backgrounds.

The Adult Migrant English Program should include employment and pathway counselling, and more streaming and clustering of classes should occur to integrate English as a second language and vocational education and training in areas of job opportunity.

Greater flexibility at the provider level should be considered so that VET funding can address the needs of people from a language other than English background for language support, employment counselling and workplace experience.

System-wide professional development in cross-cultural competencies for VET trainers would also be useful.

*A fair go: Factors impacting on vocational education and training participation and completion in ethnic communities, by Judith Miralles, 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 these NCVER Research Overviews in *Literacy Link*. We invite readers to contribute their responses to them.



## ▶ ADULT LITERACY RESEARCH

### Adult literacy in call centre and aged care industries: Two-dimensional work

Peter Waterhouse and Crina Virgona

▶ **THIS REPORT INVESTIGATES** literacy within organisations from two industries — aged care and call centres. The study was prompted by the sense that workers with limited literacies would struggle in the new world of work, which requires flexible employment, self-managed careers and individually negotiated contracts. Casual employment is now estimated to account for 20% of the workforce.

Research revealed two key findings — that most casual workers were not transient or working in a number of jobs as was expected, and that the number of people identified with literacy needs was smaller than anticipated. In fact, people with generic skills, such as those required for employability, social abilities and the capacity to read workplace cultures, could sustain employment even with limited English language literacy.

Qualitative research was conducted among employment agencies, training providers and employers in the chosen industries. Communication standards and workplace literacies were discussed with supervisors, managers and trainers. Nineteen workers, mostly contingent (contract, casual or itinerant) or with perceived low literacy, were interviewed in depth.

The research was framed around questions of employers' literacy demands, workers' literacy transfer strategies, and organisational management of skill transferability.

In aged care, standards now required by accreditation and funding authorities strongly influence personal care attendants' relationships with old people. Their language, operational literacies and reports have become more impersonal.

Literacies of call centre operators are subject to intense analysis, regulated by requirements for consistent, fast and amicable service. Call centre recruiters value oral communication and positive attitudes above ordinary reading and writing skills.

Facilities are highly proceduralised — aged care along industry lines, and call centres along the enterprise lines of key performance indicators.

In aged care, successful personal care attendants 'read the culture' and adapt organisational norms to particular situations. To be able to transfer their skills across workplaces, the contingent workers must use informal learning and develop the ability to understand and interpret the workplace context. Call centre operators, however, appear to have limited opportunities to transfer skills.

Aged care is a 'best practice' model of training, meaning there are common reference points for employers, trainers and trainees, and consistency and transferability across the industry. Call centres have a 'competitive excellence' model, with competence defined by workplace standards, trainers seeking learning opportunities within company key performance indicators, and lower transferability.

In both industries, active trainer interpretation or adaptation of training packages is seen to take second place to industry or enterprise imperatives.

#### ▶ Messages for policy and practice

The VET system is challenged to serve the broad needs of individuals, the community and the economy, and to resist the narrowing of literacy and generic skills for company requirements.



To avoid an undue focus on company learning agendas, off-site training can provide an opportunity to address broader educational issues, beyond the immediate employer interests.

It is important to moderate the influence of external auditors on the idea of what competence actually is. In order to ensure that this occurs trainers should re-focus their critical attention on the regulatory frameworks and training packages, by assessing practices that are in keeping with training principles.

'Transferability' involves generic literacy and communication skills that workers can then translate to other workplaces. This should be regarded as a significant generic skill requirement, and one which trainers should give more prominence.

Both industries are highly 'proceduralised', which means that workplace practice is standardised. This does not encourage workers to question or show initiative. To counter this, policy-makers, employers and on-site trainers should promote local discussion and communities of practice.

## ► Messages for trainers

To deliver holistic training using training packages, trainers appear to need a higher level of basic education than the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training. In addition, they require continuing development in their role.

Workshops could be used to encourage trainers to adapt training and assessment flexibly to various work environments, using 'range statements' and 'evidence guides' from training packages.

Trainers and teachers need assistance to be able to identify generic skills for 'transferability', and to draw these to learners' attention for further development.

## ► Messages for employers

Employers need to develop workplace learning cultures which help staff adapt to the constant changes of today's workforce. In particular, employers could seek a better balance between industry procedure and the changing needs of the workplace.

In aged care, employers are urged to adopt worker-friendly documentation, alternative appraisal processes, local communities of practice, more appropriate forms of information technology implementation, and more inclusive feedback and training for their workers.

Call centres are encouraged to recognise the generic skill and employment benefits of accredited training and recognition of prior learning.

*Adult literacy in call centre and aged care industries: Two-dimensional work*, by Peter Waterhouse and Crina Virgona, will be available soon. To be alerted when it is available, subscribe to NCVER News at <http://www.ncver.edu.au/newsevents/news.html>

ACAL is pleased to publish these NCVER Research Overviews in *Literacy Link*. We invite readers to contribute their responses to them.

*This article highlights the importance of the intellectual and emotional readiness of participants in determining whether they are able to fully engage in a job search program based on accredited training. The situation is complicated by teachers being confined to teaching pre-determined outcomes with limited capacity to tailor the program to meet the needs of the individual students. The following case study highlights this situation. Bremer TAFE (Queensland) submitted this article to their Minister's office for approval prior to publication in 'Literacy Link'.*

**B**remer TAFE received funding for a mature-age Job Search Program. Advertisements were placed in local newspapers calling for applications from people who were interested in returning to work. The course was offered free of charge and was to be delivered over six weeks. Five modules were taken from the *Certificate I in Workplace Preparation and Practices 39030 QLD*. Prepared units for each module were self-paced; however, there was significant teacher assistance and guidance given.

The program started with two groups of 15 students—three men and 27 women. All applicants went through exactly the same selection process, were enrolled in the same units and were taught by the same teachers but from the first lesson it was glaringly obvious that the two groups were very different.

Information gained from the interview process revealed that the majority of the students suffered from low self-esteem. In the course of discussion many participants revealed that they had been involved in (and some still were in) abusive relationships. Further, in the two groups there were a number of participants who felt that they had been socially isolated. In many cases this isolation could be partly attributed to the participants' involvement in abusive relationships and in other cases it was because they had been full time carers of children with severe physical, mental and emotional conditions as well as carers of aged parents who also had a range of associated health problems. The interview process clearly indicated that many students had not achieved Year 10 level at school and that they had unpleasant memories of school.

In spite of life having treated them quite harshly, one group approached the program with trepidation but with a commitment to seeing the course through and overcoming all obstacles. It was clear that they had made decisions about the need to change their situation and they were mentally prepared to see the course as the first step.

The students were open and receptive to all

new ideas, approaches, suggestions and relished the challenges that the learning presented.

On the other hand, the other group were overwhelmed by the requirements of an accredited training course and the effort that was required of participants to achieve outcomes. Every new concept was met with resistance and aggression as they showed their unwillingness to move from their comfort zone. This resistance could have been attributed in part to their lack of literacy skills and the fact that they were unwilling for this lack to be revealed.

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***"Currently we put the cart before the horse because we have the funding and THEN we get the participants."***

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The effect of these differences on the program was considerable. One group bonded, showed initiative in organising and prioritising their work, instigated peer tutoring and generally supported each other through the process. On a number of occasions various participants expressed their appreciation at the opportunity this training was giving them. The teachers were accepted as part of the team and viewed as a resource to help them achieve their aims.

By contrast, the other group operated in a very different way. The sub-sets they formed were characterised by misunderstandings and hurt feelings, and changed frequently. Students spent a lot of time adjusting to the different group norms. The teachers believed they were viewed as authority figures rather than an adjunct to the learning process. The social opportunities offered by the course were more important than working towards any of the outcomes of the training.

In spite of the difference in attitudes and readiness for learning between the two groups, the same outcomes were to be achieved within the same time frame. There was a concern to ensure that the students finished the course with positive outcomes and feelings of success and not to add one more failure to their lives. One group finished with time to spare whereas

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## One size does not fit all (cont.)

the other group required an extra fifteen hours to complete the course requirements. The extra hours were an initiative of the teachers and not the group.

Did all the students leave the program with the same knowledge? Even though both groups completed the course, the question of whether or not transferable knowledge was gained by all participants is doubted. In one group the students were actively job searching as the course progressed. Many had taken the initiative and registered with Centrelink and would daily search for jobs on the Internet. Over half the group had already applied for jobs and some had already taken part in interviews. However, the other group offered many excuses for not taking their first job searching step and were quite aggressive when encouraged to do this.

What is the solution? If these programs which are intended to assist long-term unemployed people to return to work are truly to address some of the barriers they face, there needs to be more flexibility in the choice of training options and a change to the funding.

Currently we put the cart before the horse because we have the funding and then we get the participants. In the above situation if we had been able to redesign the program completely we would have offered a mixture of accredited and non-accredited training for one group and completely accredited training for the other.

The variable of 'the time allotted to the delivery of the course' should also be able to be tackled when problems arise. Is the aim to get students through the courses? Or is it to genuinely address their problems and then prepare a career plan that caters for their needs? This we believe would have met the needs of both groups.

This exercise has certainly confirmed that 'One size does not fit all.'

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