Rethinking Literacy: new words, new thoughts and new ways to use them

Sharon Brown

In the December 2005 edition of Literacy Link, Jane Gunn gave an overview of the successful ACAL Forum held in Brisbane. We follow up in this edition with an abridged version of the Forum's guest speaker's engaging address about her work with Murwillumbah youth in the OFF THE WALL project.

In this article I would like to share some ideas that I have found useful in the design and facilitation of the structure, content and practice of adult and youth learning programs. All theory in practice is, at best, a work in progress: organically adjusted and evolving over time. So as you read, please take note of the things that interest you, in the hope that you will be able to develop them further and weave them into your practice. I hope that readers will find ideas that will act as a springboard for greater inspiration.

The ideas grow from two main concepts. The first is that learning is greatly enhanced when the personal and professional *processes of learning are as explicit and conscious* as the content of a course. In this way the learners' and the teachers' identities are fully present and participating; information is more easily integrated and learning is more likely. In practice this enables learners to grow more aware of their own learning journey and supports their integration of learning into knowledge. Learning is most empowering when *who we are* grows with the new information or skills gained, and again this supports the process of learning becoming integrated into our identity and our lives. For this to happen, a learner's core identity needs to be safe and anchored in their learning environment: an environment that invites learners to participate should also provide learners with the language and thinking to become aware of their own learning process. This enables risk and discovery, and a sense of achievement that is personal and goes beyond the skills or information learned, leading to learning that opens new ways of thinking, new ways of doing and participation in new social and professional domains.

The second concept I want to share relates to the notion of rapport. A Russian theorist called Vygotsky, said that learning is most effective and easily integrated when there is mutual regard within a shared social context. I believe he was right. When a teacher and student *share the experience of learning*, there is a shared social context

regardless of any other differences. We all know that if there is no real interest on the teacher's part the students are less likely to be engaged. It is vital that teachers explicitly model and discuss their personal learning evolution for and with their students. As teachers we must believe in what we are doing and encourage students to believe in what they are doing, and to have their identity involved.

There are of course many shared social contexts possible in any learning situation. In this article I will give some specific examples of these ideas in action within a particular learning environment. These examples can prompt us to rethink literacy and inspire us to design courses that support participants to rethink literacy in their own learning journey and in their lives.

Whatever we teach, whatever the content of our courses, we are teaching literacy. There are new words, new thoughts and new ways to use them. If learners are to integrate and use what they have ▶

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learned, their self-concept must develop also, because using literacy is about relationships. Teaching is also about growing people. This aspect of literacy learning needs to be conscious within course design and practice, and by natural progression, for the learner. Looking closely at how learning happens, brings me to think about identity and how language, identity and our concepts of reality all operate together in the personal learning process.

Our language is who we are

Language in all its constructive (and destructive) forms expresses one's identity and one's relationships. Using literacy skills — skills that are integrated into who we are — gives learners the opportunities to participate in new social and professional domains. The ways of using the language that we grow up with are integrated into who we are. The discourses of our culture enable us to participate in certain social domains, to have relationships, to belong and to have power within those social domains. These systems of language and identity evolve and express who we are, but by their very nature have limitations, 'edges' if you like, that maintain the clarity and integrity of identity: a phenomenon which is dynamic, fluid and in continual definition, and redefinition. Limitations provide supporting boundaries, strength and security but they can also be self-limiting, sometimes blocking new learning, even for those who have decided, booked in, paid and are attending a course.

These limitations can manifest in many ways, so individual and yet so universal. Perhaps the best way to illustrate this is to describe how I took them into account in the design and facilitation of the OFF THE WALL youth literacy project in Murwillumbah. I thought about the social domains my participants might move within, what identities they might have and what limitations they might come with. I thought about how I could design the course to take these factors into account.

To create a secure environment for my participants (and I) to learn and grow, I chose a focus that validated their identities and their social domains; I chose the graffiti art wall in Murwillumbah. The wall is three kilometres long; it is now a 'legal' wall and is a gallery of incredible youth art, a youth form of communication and expression. It is an absolute expression of youth identities.

The idea was to anchor and thereby strengthen the participants' identities by focusing on this place, through connections to and ownership of the wall and the art-form. This would create a strong social foundation from which to expand literacy skills, and participation into new social domains. Although fascinated by it, graffiti art was something I knew little about, this placed participants in the position of knowledge, placing their reality/identity paradigm at the centre of the course. We would be teaching each other, and I was madly enthusiastic.

The 'wall' also stood as a metaphor for the limitations and resistance we might experience in the course and the process of getting the wall legal, getting the townsfolk onside was a great narrative — a great model for the participants' journey. The original artists who pushed for the wall to be legal, had to grow beyond their usual social domains: to liaise with the council, the local police, business people, and the media. They had to expand their literacy skills to be able to write proposals, apply for funding and give interviews.

In the first few sessions of the OFF THE WALL project we sat and chatted, and I mainly listened. I listened for speech patterns, for the words used. I listened to the ideas inside the words, for suggestions of where limitations might be in their identity/reality paradigms. We talked about the wall, the work on it and quickly the course was established as a place that reflected positive aspects of youth identity. Several of the participants were writers on the wall and others related to it strongly as a youth place.

My participants' identities, their literacy, their forms of communication and their realities were welcome, and my interest in graffiti art gave us a shared social context that played a large part in forging a sense of safety for learners and interest in learning. We shared breakfast — food is a great way to create rapport and a shared social domain. They knew I cared about them when I cooked those pancakes with my home grown eggs.

A well-known horse trainer once said, (about horses): 'They won't care how much you know until they know how much you care'. I think it is the same with teaching youth and probably for many adults as well. I know I am better able to open up to learn from someone if there is some common ground and mutual respect. The Murwillimbah youth needed to know I was there because I believed in something, not just because I was paid to talk to them. It sounds obvious perhaps, but I made my reasons and my beliefs open for them. Why I was there, what I ▶

wanted to get out of the course, my expectations and my concerns and fears as well. This honesty about my motivations established rapport and modeled the way for the groundwork to begin.

I introduced some new ways of thinking and talking about learning, to create a dialogue about making the learning process explicit and transparent. We discussed how learning can make us 'grow out of our skin', how we might feel 'itchy' and uncomfortable for a while; how we might feel vulnerable and different for a while (that in fact this is bound to happen) until we have a comfortable new skin, as a bigger self. We explored the concept of comfort zones, and how the boundaries that hold the integrity of our identity can also be limitations to learning and growing. We talked about how they might normally respond, or react, when they are outside of their comfort zones, when they are challenged.

So the experience of discomfort with learning: about how you 'do' your life, the social domains you move in and who you are within them, was totally normalised. We discussed how that discomfort might look and what emotional responses to such discomfort we might see and experience within our learning program. The responses were that perhaps we would get cranky and difficult, non-cooperative, judgmental of ourselves and others. We predicted that perhaps participants might suddenly decide they don't like me and that the whole thing is 'rubbish' (or something stronger). The expectation was that given this discomfort we might at times feel tired or bored, feel like leaving or think that there is no reason to come (fortunately breakfast always got us over that moment). Learners realised that the discomfort was a normal part of the process.

We took the time to discover more about how our brains worked, how we would grow new connections, new neurological pathways, to integrate new learning and understanding, if we gave ourselves the chance for this to happen. We discussed what we would do about any blocking that showed up. Specific state management techniques were woven into every day of the course. We practiced a variety of advanced physical skills such as martial arts, gymnastics and yoga to build skills and understanding of energy; awareness of their physical and emotional state and how to influence them.

I used questions to highlight the expanding and limiting aspects of their identity/reality paradigm and to explore

learning as a process of questioning that is not necessarily about answers. I used questions such as…

- Who in your life or past might disapprove of your new learning?
- Who might you grow past and leave behind?
- What might you lose?
- What might you gain?
- In what way might you be challenged or changed as a person?
- What could you get out of this course?

We often had discussions, used mind maps to look at likes, needs and fears in the group. Sometimes questions were responded to in journals for privacy and self-reflection. I used a graphical representation of each person's identity 'inscape': all of the people, things and influences within it, to see "where we were at". These became reference points to chart developments over the course and to affirm the fluid and dynamic nature of who they are, opening the way for who they could be.

Already we had a new literacy, a new set of skills and words, ways of thinking and being that were integrating into their bodies, before we really began the core content of the course. This increased awareness of their learning process, how learning is not outside of us, it happens within who we are, our sense of self and our world view, enabled the participants to consciously participate in their own learning journey.

Everything up to this point was about developing a strong central anchor for identity. When learners began to feel a little out of focus (in their learning and growing) they would feel safe enough to continue. The graffiti art wall was a brilliant identity anchor — any time the class got a bit wobbly we would go and walk the wall, three kilometres one way and then back, treading the path, touching the wall, reconnecting to place, to the earth, the art and the energy of that youth domain; breathing oxygen into the brain, relaxing, absorbing a fullness of colour and shape and design of that public art gallery.

The Murwillimbah wall is internationally recognised; writers come from all over the world to 'hit' it. It was important to document its history. It had never been done and pieces are painted over and reworked all the time. The content of the course included interviewing the original artists, and people in the town, putting together a radio show for Bay FM, researching and putting together a booklet on the wall ▶
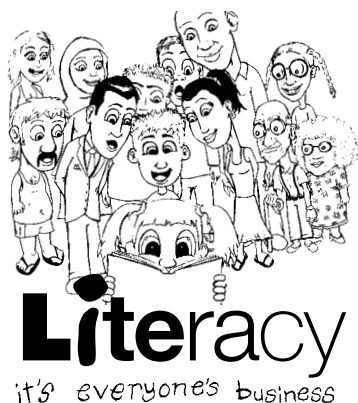
Essential Skills: Essential Confusion?

Nancy Jackson

Essential Skills is a term we hear more and more these days, especially from the (Canadian) government. It is a key part of the Workplace Skills Strategy announced in December 2004. While some people are using this term to mean the same thing as 'workplace literacy,' others say it's not the same at all; there seems to be a lot of confusion. What is behind this new language? And what does it mean for the literacy field?

The website of the Government of Canada describes Essential Skills as "the everyday skills (needed) to carry out a variety of life and work tasks." However, Essential Skills have all been developed to describe jobs. Since 1994, the government has produced more than 200 'profiles' defining Essential Skills for occupations requiring secondary school or less. The profiles don't focus on specific technical skills, but rather on general or generic skills that are said to apply across a range of jobs. Defining skills in this way is supposed to help increase flexibility for both individuals and employers, by showing how people might transfer their skills from one job to the next.

Nine Essential Skill areas have been defined: reading text, document use, numeracy, writing, oral communication, working with others, continuous learning, thinking skills and computer use. Just like in literacy, five levels of complexity are outlined in each of these areas. Three of these areas (reading text, document use, and numeracy) also have been developed into a workplace skills test called TOWES, currently being promoted through the college system in most provinces. Overall, these tools introduce a new and more standardised framework for programs that might formerly have been offered as workplace literacy. Depending on how these tools are used, they can be expected to standardise workplace learning by tying the content of learning to job profiles defined by the government in consultation with employers (see HRDC).

Words like essential skills or 'generic skills' are becoming familiar not just in Canada, but also in other countries, like Great Britain, Australia and the United States. And in all these places, literacy workers are debating the meanings and implications of these developments. Some say that words like essential or generic skills are full of more hope than the word literacy, because individual learners are not embarrassed to be associated with them. But others say these frameworks are too narrow, because they focus only on jobs, not on the rest of life. They also focus specifically on employers' views of jobs, not the views of workers, ▶

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with many original artworks (by participants), photographs of the wall and archive material.

The opportunity arose for 'Brad', one of the participants, to enter the ACE Colleges Art Prize. It was a fabulous opportunity to put his learning journey into new social domains. We went to buy paint together. We had talked about 'Brad's' usual relationships in the social domain of the paint shop, and how strange it might be for him to do it differently, how it might feel. We went in together and I started the ball rolling chatting to the shop assistant about paint quality and colours. When Brad relaxed enough to join in, he took over, having an entirely new relationship of mutual politeness and respect with the assistant as they discussed the virtues of various paints. 'Brad' was treated like an artist, rather than a potential shop lifter. I could have just bought the paint on the way home from work one day but we would have missed the opportunity for 'Brad' to experience the difference between his usual and his new experiences, and the word, thought and action differences between them. Later 'Brad' reflected on that experience and how he could integrate it into a bigger idea of himself. 'Brad' worked a piece, and it was shown in the art gallery, a spectacularly new social domain for him. His huge piece of graffiti art, carefully hung on a wall of its own in the gallery, considered and respected in the wider art world.

I measured the success of the course in the depth of participation, in the philosophical discussions about identity and life and the ways we do things. I measured success by the products of the creative effort of the participants, and the rapport that expanded the teacher/ student relationships. I also measured success by my own growth and learning.

One participant was offered a place in the Rotary Youth Leadership Action training week. After an interview process, where 'Kate' had to make a presentation to a panel explaining why she should be chosen, she observed how different it was relating to 'those people'. They were interested in her life and she realised they could be involved in her future. Previously she'd had nothing to do with them. The skills we had practiced came in handy for 'Kate' in her new social domains.

It truly was community learning, the most relevant social domain for learning for many people. All of us were more integrated into our communities as a result of the course and our identities were strengthened. The philosophy of making the chaos of the learning process… with all of its non-linear movement, expansion and contraction …explicit and integrated within the design of the course, all within a shared and expanding social context, gave the participants the opportunity to grow in literacy and grow as people.

We can all learn whatever we need when learning is placed where it belongs, within a shared social context, with mutual regard and for mutual benefit. We can learn anything we want to, when we understand the process of our own learning journey and its discomfort as we shed old tight skins and grow new ones. We can learn anything when we are in a safe and supported environment. With the roots of who we are firm in the soil of self, community and culture; we can branch out into new social domains. ■

unions, or educators. Nevertheless, in all these countries, governments continue to press forward with this agenda. What should we make of all this? What differences can we expect all this to make for literacy workers and learners?

Changing work, changing skills

I want to take a few steps back and focus on a broader picture of change that underlies this growing international interest in Essential Skills. These changes are so familiar in everyday life that it is easy to miss their significance in the big picture. I am referring to widespread changes in the nature of work itself: the organisation of work, the tools and technology of work, the look, feel, and smell of work, the location of work, the hours of work, the demands of work, the opportunities at work, the chances of finding or keeping work, and the expectations about who we are at work (Cappelli et al, 1997).

A lot of books and articles have been written about all this over the last decade. But here I want to draw attention to just one profoundly important point: that is, how we have learned to expect constant, rapid practice change as normal. In the world of work, nothing stays the same for long. Products change, markets change, customers or clients change, time lines change, machines change, materials change, tools change, management methods change, pay arrangements change, working practices change, supervision methods change, knowledge needed at work changes, skills needed at work change.

So whereas the young people of the past thought in terms of acquiring an 'occupation' for a lifetime, the youth of today are told to expect they will change occupations at least six times in their working life. The so-called 'enterprising' employee of today is supposed to be "happy to serve, but ready to go" (duGay) when they are no longer needed by the employer. All this means that having work, and keeping work, is being reinvented in our time not just as a process of economic, technological and social change, but importantly as the necessity for ongoing personal 'retooling' as well.

This notion of constant change alters how we think about ourselves ...

This constant demand for change translates into a popular understanding of 'learning' as a condition of economic survival. Corporations are told they must become a 'learning organisation' to survive in a global market. Individuals are told we must 'learn' to get a job, keep up with our current jobs, or even to stay employable. This notion of constant change alters how we think about ourselves, our jobs, our hopes and plans for the future. If we pay attention, we can see how these ideas are slowly shifting the culture of our workplaces, our unions (if we are lucky enough to belong to one), our families and our communities.

This new environment has generated a lot of interest in how people actually do their work. For almost two decades, bookstores and business magazines have been full of ever-changing advice on how to re-organise and manage work for 'high performance,' particularly by bringing about continuous improvement in the way work is done. Whereas twenty years ago the business gurus said that improvement comes from investing in computers, today they say it comes from investing in people. Investing in people means taking charge–through training and other forms of performance monitoring–of how employees work together, how they communicate with each other, how they talk to the customer and the boss, and even how they think, look and feel about their work.

All this focus on job performance has brought the theory and practice of skills training to the attention of the business community, and, by extension, government policy makers, to an extent that would have been hard to imagine two decades ago. Skills development has become a pivotal point in public policy not just in Canada, but across the industrialised world, with the common message that the future welfare of employers, working people, and communities and nations is tied to a skills agenda.

Meanwhile, those with long experience in the training field will recognise that this terrain is more complex than it seems. The needs and interests of different stakeholders turn out to be quite different, sometimes conflicting. And across the board, the much-promised economic 'returns' on investment in skills training have usually turned out to be more practice distant, long-term, even elusive, than stakeholders usually have in mind. (Green)

Generic skills: complex and contested terrain

In response to this complexity, national policy frameworks for skills development differ considerably in their details. But one commonality over nearly two decades is a growing focus on skills described as core, generic or essential. The great attraction of this idea for policy makers is the belief that these terms name skills that are 'transferable' between settings, thus contributing to a workforce that is flexible and adaptable. But, alas, these claims also turn out to involve more complexity than meets the eye.

For example, in Canada as elsewhere, policy makers often say that the attraction of generic/essential skills policies is that employers value them as reliable indicators of the performance capability of the workforce. But researchers in Australia are beginning to question this link. For instance, Waterhouse and Virgona (2002) at Workplace Learning Initiatives, an award-winning private training company, point out that the concepts associated with generic, essential, key or core skills may be actually more useful to policy makers than to employers or individuals. They are useful to policy makers specifically because they are an abstraction from reality, making it possible to do large-scale descriptions of a population **from a distance**. This makes them highly suitable for the needs and interests of high level policy makers, at a national and even transnational level. Their growing prominence in policy discourses around the world offers some weight to this proposition.

But importantly, the opposite is also true. What's useful 'from a distance' may not be useful from 'up close,' for ▶

precisely the same reasons: their abstract character. Indeed, on the basis of a decade of research and hands-on experience, these Australian researchers are arguing that for employers, learners and educators, who are all concerned with actual functional capacities in specific working environments, abstraction is not a good guide. On the contrary, they argue that the necessary basis of **both** successful workplace functioning **and** meaningful learning for individuals is increasingly being understood as an active process of "critical engagement, questioning [and] reflection…" embedded in practical activity (Waterhouse and Virgona; Waterhouse). They say

> …while it may be possible conceptually to abstract a generic label for a set of site-specific capacities with superficial similarities (e.g., numeracy, literacy, problem solving, use of technology), at this level such entities are not the concrete or functional capacities that individuals actually use. They are meaningful only at a distance.
>
> *(Stevenson pp. 2-3, cited in Waterhouse p. 3)*

In addition, there may be similar problems with the notion of 'transferability,' which is also central to the popularity of generic or essential skills. Transfer of learning refers to how abilities acquired in one situation apply in other situations. Since today's workforce is said to be highly mobile, a common issue, then, for formal education and workplace training, including the policies that support and encourage them, is "how to ensure that the learning which occurs can be transferred or applied to new contexts." (Tennant p. 165)

But a growing body of research evidence shows that this popular belief in transferability may also be deeply flawed (Billett, 2001). In brief, these researchers argue that while we recognise that people with all levels of skills and knowledge do indeed apply their understandings across settings in various ways, we misunderstand 'how' this occurs. The capacity for such 'transfer' is not a ready-made property of particular skills, even of those we call essential or generic. Rather, according to this research, the process of transfer is an active achievement of problem solving and interpretation on the part of an individual.

Furthermore, the success of this active transfer is also heavily influenced by what they call the 'climate or 'culture' of transfer – which means the degree to which the new setting itself is hospitable to this work of problem solving and application. But importantly, in every case, the skill to be transferred must be adjusted or reinvented by the learner to fit the specifics of each new circumstance. This work of reinventing skill in a new context involves "re-shaping, re-application and adaptation (sometimes subtle, sometimes dramatic) of established skills and understandings." (Waterhouse p. 7; Billet; Tennant)

Ultimately, these researchers reject the idea that "knowledge can in any way be general, abstract, or decontextualised." Instead, they argue that "even so-called general knowledge only has power in specific circumstances" and "abstract representations are meaningless unless they can be made

Transfer of learning refers to how abilities acquired in one situation apply in other situations.

specific to the situation at hand…" (Lave and Wenger cited in Tennant p. 174). In this view, the potential for transfer is not achieved by "learners acquiring abstract knowledge and procedures which can be applied to many situations." (Tennant 1999:175) Instead, transfer is achieved when individuals use problem solving skills to make sense of how old information fits each new context. In this view, the possibility of mastering new skills, as well as successfully transferring them to a new context, may actually be undermined if the skills and knowledge are defined as 'inherently transferable' and taught in a way that tries to make them abstract and decontextualised. Taken out of context, such skills and knowledge may actually be stripped of their meaning, not only for use in one setting but in every setting, and not only at work, but also in the rest of life. (Waterhouse; Waterhouse and Virgona)

These understandings of transfer as active and 'learning-based' stand in sharp contrast to notions of transferability that currently underlie the approach to generic or essential skills in use across the industrialised world. If these researchers are correct, they raise many compelling questions worthy of attention in further research.

Skills assessment or skills development

Another important and contested issue, about which there is much less research to draw on, is the way frameworks for essential skills are actually used by various stakeholders. It is often hard to separate the promise or potential of policies and tools from the practical reality – and thus the impact-of how they are being used. Here I want to focus on the difference between using an essential skills framework for purposes of skills assessment and using it as the basis for skills development. These functions are sometimes connected and sometimes not; and sometimes they are used by entirely different stakeholders, for quite different purposes.

For example, in the realm of skills assessment, the demand is growing internationally for tools that claim to provide broad descriptions of 'skill levels' of national populations. Along these lines, policy makers across the developed and developing world are increasingly interested in assessment exercises such as PISA (the Programme for International Student Assessment) of performance in school subjects and IALSS (the International Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey). Governments increasingly see this kind of data as a condition of being 'open for business' in the global economy. It is part of attracting transnational corporate investment, and it is part of participating in trade agreements such as NAFTA and the WTO (see OECD). Thus, for policy makers, such assessment tools are 'must haves.'

But even domestic employers, operating in firms of all sizes, have growing reason to want assessment tools that are not immediately connected to skills development. For example, it is increasingly common, as part of the hiring process for both permanent and temporary workers, to use testing of existing skill levels (in addition to testing for attitudes, aptitudes and even for drug use) to inform ▶

hiring decisions. Indeed, this kind of assessment is done precisely to reduce the need for skills development (training), particularly among temporary employees.

For all these purposes, it is very important to know how well a framework, essential skills or any other, actually performs as a tool of assessment. But it may not matter how well it functions as the basis for skills development, per se. In these cases, at both international and national levels, the desire for skills assessment is disconnected from the actual work or responsibility for skills development. Thus the stakeholders involved in these different domains might have very different ideas about the adequacy of any framework, since they are judging by very different yardsticks.

Meanwhile, for those stakeholders whose needs and interests are in skills development per se, an entirely different set of needs and judgments is likely to be relevant. In this domain, the track record of generic or essential skills frameworks in various international jurisdictions is also quite complex. Indeed, controversy seems to be the common thread.

According to its proponents, essential or generic skills are the 'enabling' skills needed for work, learning and other activities of daily life. They provide the foundation for learning all other skills, and thus they enable people to evolve with their jobs and adapt to workplace change. But according to the critics, these same essential or generic skills are said to be associated with a 'veritable galaxy' of soft, social, interactional skills, frequently indistinguishable from a 'wish list' of personal characteristics, behaviours, and attitudes desired by employers. They are also said to offer a superficial and fragmented understanding of the nature of skills, and to 'water down' the idea of skills to accommodate a low tech, low skill, low wage economic path (see Payne).

From all sides of these debates, we can see that strategies for learning are ultimately inseparable from much larger questions about economic and social visions. Even if we call them essential, or generic, skills policies turn out not to be simple, universally acclaimed as a good thing, with the power to unite us across differences. Instead, they are another complex terrain of struggle, where everything is more complicated than it seems.

Whither Canadian research?

Heated debate on these and other issues amongst educators and policy makers has endured across international jurisdictions for more than two decades. Given this track record of controversy elsewhere, we can only hope that the Canadian government will tread carefully in approaching any national policy for skills development, based on notions of literacy, Essential Skills or any other concept.

One message seems clear from the controversies discussed above. That is, a bold and innovative program of detailed, ethnographic research on the process and conditions of successful workplace learning and transfer would be very helpful to Canadian employers, workers and educators alike. But importantly, the research cited above suggests that the focus of these investigations would need to be less on individuals, treated as cognitive or behavioural units in isolation, and more on how people function in the context of workplace culture and relationships. Such research might include questions about how individuals are supported (or not) to learn in their jobs, how they create the time and conditions for learning, how to encourage mentoring relationships rather than competitive and blaming ones, and how workplaces can be made safer environments so that all individuals can take the risk of learning or applying something new.

Such a shift in focus would bring Canadian research on skills development into line not only with leading edge educational theory but also with contemporary theories of workplace management, both of which are increasingly focused on the centrality of workplace culture in shaping individual behaviour (including learning) at work. ■

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Review of the National Reporting System

Kate Perkins, Philippa McLean and Linda Wyse

In 2004, a scoping exercise was conducted to examine how the National Reporting System (NRS) is currently used; how effectively the NRS serves these uses and its potential for adaptation to a broader range of applications. The results of this initial research are reported in Perkins K (2005) *'Reframe, rename, revitalise. Future Directions for the language, literacy and numeracy National Reporting System'*. Perkins (2005: 6) found that the NRS appeared to have developed, 'a strong following amongst those with the background knowledge and opportunity to become expert users'.

Most practitioners interviewed by Perkins reported finding the NRS extremely useful as a framework for thinking about, discussing and reporting on Language, Literacy and Numeracy (LLN) performance. They felt that the NRS captured LLN complexity, and was flexible enough to be utilised with diverse clients in varied contexts. All identified minor inconsistencies and ambiguities that should be addressed, but the consistent criticisms were the physical layout of the manual, which many found daunting and off-putting; or the ways in which the NRS was utilised within Government funded programs.

Most academics and others consulted believed that the theoretical underpinnings of the NRS were generally sound. However, some saw a need to rethink the place of aspects related to Information Computer Technologies (ICT), and a few raised questions about the potential of the NRS to incorporate a broader range of literacies. Despite general support for the NRS, it was widely suggested that it was time for a formal review and revision, with the focus on streamlining the existing framework, rather than on rethinking it from first principles.

In response to the recommendations in Perkin's report, the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) instigated the first stage of a three stage process[1] to be conducted in 2005.

Stage 1 has involved a number of consultations to
- validate the scoping exercise
- develop a draft revised NRS
- explore the potential to develop an 'essential skills' framework based on key NRS concepts.

There is a DEST proviso that the five levels in the NRS be retained, as this allows NRS outcomes to be mapped to the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). The Stage 1 review has sought feedback on all other elements within the NRS and begun an exploration of the potential to incorporate recent theoretical developments in LL&N. Any significant conceptual changes will be carefully considered to ensure that such changes do not undermine the identified strengths of the NRS or lose the support of the current base of expert users.

> *There is a DEST proviso that the five levels in the NRS be retained ...*

Note

1 Stage 3 of this DEST process will incorporate Resource development and professional development activities to support implementation

Stage 1, conducted by a consortium of Linda Wyse and Associates, CAE and Kulu is nearing completion. While working on revisions to the full NRS, consortium members explored the potential for the NRS to provide the conceptual scaffolding of a general LLN framework or of a broader 'essential skills' framework that could provide the scaffolding, and a shared language to describe an identified set of life-skills. It is envisaged that the key elements of this framework would be presented in varying levels of complexity to suit different purposes, audiences and contexts.

Stage 1 Practitioner Consultations: Key findings.
The initial consultation process focused primarily, but not exclusively, on practitioners, with the intention of drawing on the knowledge and experience of the people who actually use the NRS regularly. At the time of writing, over 400 people from diverse contexts and with diverse client groups have been directly involved in the survey and/or workshops that have been conducted nationally.

114 people from all States and Territories provided detailed input via a survey. Survey respondents came from all parts of the LLN field, with two thirds having LLNP and /or WELL experience. The majority worked mainly with NRS levels 1-3, with 25% regularly using Level 4 and 10% using level 5 (mainly in an ESL context). Their input was taken into account in the development of draft materials related to the core elements of the NRS: revising the macroskills of Reading, Writing, Numeracy, Oral Communication and Learning Strategies and these were then used to gather further feedback from practitioners via a series of workshops held around the country.

There was a high level of consistency between survey responses and the findings of the initial scoping exercise. Almost all of those who responded to the survey reported that the NRS was a useful tool in identifying client LLN strengths and weaknesses, and in tracking their progress. They felt it also served an important purpose by providing a nationally consistent, standardised framework and common language for talking about, and reporting on, client LLN competencies, and was flexible enough for broad application. Half the respondents felt that the major issue with the NRS was the manual, which they found complex, unwieldy and daunting. However, the other half reported that this had ceased to be a problem once they got used to it. Even so, many commented that it remained a barrier for new users, and most supported change to the layout and presentation to make it more accessible and manageable for all. There were also criticisms of the wordiness and ambiguity of the language within the NRS, and issues concerning unnecessary gaps between, and inconsistencies across, indicators.

The vast majority of respondents did not want to expand the current five macroskills. There were however a few suggestions to incorporate multiple literacies such as visual literacy, or to split Speaking and Listening into two separate macroskills. The area of most discussion was the place of ICT. About a third of respondents wanted to see computer literacy acknowledged more extensively, but were split between making it a macroskill in its own right; addressing it within Learning Strategies section or incorporating it more extensively across all macroskills.

Although there was strong support for the continued inclusion of Learning Strategies as a separate macroskill, many felt the original version focused too narrowly on goal setting and planning. Proposals for expansion covered a wide range; including incorporating ways of reporting on readiness to learn, growth in self esteem and self confidence, and critical thinking. Some suggested that there be a stronger focus on a broad range of general life skills, such as taking responsibility for learning, working in groups, and problem solving skills.

Most respondents felt that key elements of the NRS, aligned with their experience of adult learning development. Although the majority of those working in ESL seemed satisfied that the NRS was suitable for their clients, a small number reported finding the NRS less suited to reporting on the performance of people from non-English speaking backgrounds, particularly those who were highly literate and/or numerate in their first language.

As a result of the data gathered from the surveys and workshop feedback, the following key changes have been made:
- revised and updated introduction
- consistent approach/number of indicators across macroskills. i.e. five macroskills and two indicators of competence per macroskill
- expanded and revised features and performance strategies and sample activities, incorporating information from the current NRS and expanded to include a broader range of detail and a greater emphasis on ICT
- extensive revision of Learning Strategies to articulate awareness of learning strategies as well as applications within a range of social, personal, educational, community and employment contexts
- incorporation of ICT across all macroskills but with a particular focus within Learning Strategies
- revised layout organised around macroskills, including indicators, features and performance strategies and sample activities arranged by level and presented on one double page spread.

Towards Stage 2: Field testing of revised NRS and consultations regarding an essential skills framework

It is important to note that Stage 1 provided a working draft intended to generate further discussion and not to produce a finished version. Although there has been support from the field and the project advisory group for the proposed changes, extensive field testing will need to occur to validate the revisions.

Ongoing consultations and substantial trials will occur during Stage 2. It is anticipated that this extensive input will influence the shape, concepts and content of the final version. It is anticipated that feedback will be sought from academics in the field and other stakeholders such as government and industry bodies, and that the practitioner cohort will again be broadly representative, including teachers and assessors from all States and Territories working with a diverse range of learners within many different types of programs.

During the Stage 1 consultation workshops a number of practitioners indicated their interest in being involved in the field testing of the revised version of the document. We are currently compiling a list of names and would be happy to talk to anyone who would be interested. Contact information for field testing can be obtained from:
- Linda Wyse: 03 94297551, linda@lwa.au.com
- Philippa McLean: 03 9652 0709, philippa@cae.edu.au
- Kath Brewer: 03 94297551, kb@lwa.au.com

The first revision of the NRS will be available from *Literacynet* www.dest.gov.au/literacynet.

The consultants are happy to receive further input on the draft via email to kate.p@bigpond.net.au ■

And another thing…

The December 2005 edition of *Literacy Link* included an article

about the fantastic achievements of Hobart TAFE student

Kylie Direen. This article was written by one of her teachers,

Dianne Carrington-Smith.

news snippets

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New from NCVER

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NCVER is about to release a suite of new adult literacy and numeracy research project reports and in May 2006 will host a series of breakfast briefings in a number of capital cities which sum up recent research findings. Senior Project Officer at NCVER Jo Hargreaves urges ACAL readers to keep an eye on NCVER's website (www.ncver.edu.au) for research projects currently underway.

Latest research reports

The five new research reports which NCVER will publish shortly provide material focused on the:

• professional development needs of the language, literacy and numeracy workforce
• wider benefits of literacy and numeracy
• literacy and numeracy support structures for Indigenous students.

Two reports *Current and future professional development needs of the language, literacy and numeracy workforce* by Sandra Mackay, Ursula Burgoyne, Diane Warwick and Jackie Cipollone, and *The professional development requirements for Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) practitioners* by Tina Berghella, John Molenaar and Linda Wyse will assist with professional development planning for the language, literacy and numeracy workforce at local, state and national levels.

"While a number of innovative, relevant and comprehensive professional development programs are offered at national, state and local provider levels, not all of these programs are reaching a wide audience," says Sandra Mackay. The research clearly shows that the sector of the workforce in which a practitioner is located — specialist teacher, vocational trainer or volunteer — is the single most significant variable in determining professional development attitudes and issues, with each sector requiring different strategies.

Language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) specialist teachers need professional development which builds on their expertise and theoretical background. Vocational trainers are not expected to become LLN experts, but more can be done to expose them to the principles of LLN teaching and to enhance communication with specialists. Volunteer tutors highly value interaction with other LLN workers through informal networks and support structures, but have difficulties in scheduling such professional development sessions because they work so independently.

The type of professional development which should be provided depends on factors such as the level of experience, employment status and geographical location of the practitioner, as well as the sector in which they are located.

Of the respondents that were in paid work, only 32% were permanent employees. It emerged that the rest, who were part-time, casual and sessional workers, had poor relative access to employer-funded professional development activities.

Further, managers and practitioners have different preferences about the content of professional development offerings. Managers focus on professional development designed to fulfil the organisation's business or compliance needs, while practitioners focus on improving their teaching practice. The message to employing organisations is to find a balance between these two preferences for professional development.

That said, all practitioners particularly value face-to-face interaction and peer learning with colleagues, and a practical hands-on approach to professional development sessions.

The professional development requirements for WELL practitioners was a separate project specifically looking at the professional development requirements for this sector of the LLN workforce. The study found that, at the very least, the WELL practitioner must be able to:

• understand that workplace learning is contextual as each workplace has its own specific cultural and social environment which shapes LLN requirements
• determine and provide any LLN support required by individuals participating in the WELL programme
• integrate the LLN requirements of the workplace, learners, and training package units of competency
• address LLN issues and requirements in the design of teaching and assessment tools.

"How competently practitioners exercise [the above] functions is, to a significant extent, dependent on their existing baseline teacher/training skills and ongoing professional development opportunities", says John Molenaar, co-author of this report.

Findings from the background data helped to build a current profile of WELL practitioners. They were predominantly female, and half were aged between 51 and 60 years. 19% were under 40 years of age and none were under 30. The majority came to teach WELL programmes after some other form of teaching and had two or more qualifications.

The report makes recommendations on ways to offer professional development for both new and current practitioners. It also concludes that a minimum qualification may be required to ensure the quality of the program, such as the Advanced Diploma of Language, Literacy and Numeracy Practice in VET, for practitioners wishing to be involved in WELL in the future.

The wider benefits of literacy and numeracy

The most comprehensive and relevant frameworks currently available on costs and benefits relate to adult learning rather than literacy per se. They point to the importance of taking into account factors such as age ▶

and gender; collective as well as individual benefits; the 'sustaining' benefits of learning, which enable people to continue or improve what they do in their communities; and the more recognisable 'transforming' benefits such as increased employability.

Many *Literacy Link* readers will already be aware of the NCVER project undertaken by Robyn Hartley and Jackie Horne: *Social and economic benefits and costs of adult literacy in Australia: Towards a better understanding*. (*Literacy Link* , December 2005). Their research explores the various frameworks and methodologies available for assessing the social and economic costs of poor adult literacy and numeracy. It includes a literature search and consultations with experts in health and financial literacy, as well as researchers experienced in longitudinal studies and cost-benefit analyses. The report also touches upon issues relating to small business, older people and Indigenous Australians; the benefits of family literacy programs; and, the relationship between literacy and crime.

Reframing adult literacy and numeracy course outcomes: A social capital perspective by Jo Balatti, Stephen Black and Ian Falk examines the social capital outcomes that students experience from participating in a VET accredited adult literacy and numeracy course. The Australian Bureau of Statistics defines social capital as the 'networks, together with shared norms, values and understandings which facilitate co-operation within or amongst groups'.80% of the students interviewed reported a social capital outcome. This included reported changes in the number and nature of interactions that students experienced to existing and new social networks, and they also spoke of changes in the way they interacted with people in their networks. Students value these outcomes highly.

Respondents gave examples of how the course had impacted on their lives, it was clear that social capital outcomes and not improved literacy or numeracy skills had made the difference. For example, one young man did not report improvement in literacy skills but, through the course, experienced new networks which had positively changed the way he interacted with adults. This, in turn, led him to approach prospective employers and secure a job.

Adult literacy and numeracy teachers already realise that important interpersonal outcomes, like increased self-confidence, go unreported. Reporting on these outcomes may go some way towards providing a more complete picture of the benefits of literacy and numeracy courses. However, it is recognised that how this should be done is problematic.

Literacy and numeracy support structures for Indigenous students

The October 2005 edition of Literacy Link included an article by Narelle McGlusky on the project she worked on with Lenora Thaker, which examines literacy and numeracy support structures for Indigenous students. Their study *Literacy support for Indigenous people: Current systems and practices in Queensland*, found that support for Indigenous students remains inadequate across many areas of the VET sector, even though effective systems are available. To assist teachers and trainers, the report

includes guidelines about literacy and numeracy support for Indigenous students. These include:

- employing adult learning best practice; that is, understanding the student's individual cultural and educational background and finding out the student's expectations and goals
- employing Indigenous-specific best practice, such as being aware that Indigenous students may not always ask for help or clarification
- ensuring teaching materials are relevant and customised to individual needs and literacy levels, as well as being culturally appropriate and recognising that in-class one-on-one tutorial support is usually the best form of help for the student
- having Indigenous input at all stages including design, development and delivery of courses.

All of these reports will be published soon and will then available via the NCVER website: www.ncver.edu.au

Subscribe to NCVER's fortnightly electronic bulletin, *'NCVER News'*, at www.ncver.edu.au/newevents/news. html to be notified of the various reports when they are published.

Six new research projects are happening in 2006

Jan Hagston, Beth Marr and Betty Johnston will build knowledge about the use of numeracy in workplaces, and current and future needs. Their research will examine acquisition, enhancement and portability of workplace numeracy skills, and identify models (training, work processes and practice, work documentation, etc) to support the improvement of these skills.

Peter Waterhouse and Crina Virgona will investigate how industry perceives, identifies and addresses literacy, numeracy and employability skills issues, and explore the implications of these activities for policy and practice in workplaces and in adult and vocational education. In a separate project, Waterhouse and Virgona will investigate the disability and welfare sector to compare their models of practice for dealing with literacy and numeracy issues with those of the adult education sector. Activities such as process, professional identity, diagnosis and problem-solving will be examined. Observing the two groups grappling with identical case study problems will uncover possible new approaches and expand the 'kit bag' of resources for adult literacy practitioners and perhaps disability and welfare workers.

Oksana Hull and Ursula Burgoyne will investigate barriers to learning experienced by settlers from Sudan. It will outline features of classroom management practices that enable teachers to address barriers for this specific group of learners. The findings relevant to Sudanese refugee students may also be applicable to other groups of refugee settlers.

Judith Miralles and Barry Golding will examine the critical role of community organisations as places for English language and literacy learning for three refugee groups from the Horn of Africa, the Balkans and the Middle East. The research will specifically determine the role of community organisations in providing important informal networks ▶

that connect the refugees to the Australian community and the world of work, and identify successful approaches to achieving this.

Darryl Dymock is undertaking a mapping exercise to obtain as full a picture as possible of non-accredited/community-based adult language, literacy and numeracy provision across Australia. In addition to basic demographic data about the students, information will be obtained about their motivations and outcomes, assessment and pathways to other education, training and employment. The research will provide the first comprehensive profile of this important sector of literacy provision in Australia. Darryl is keen to hear from people who want to be involved or can offer suggestions. You may contact Darryl directly by email d.dymock@griffith.edu.au or by phone 07 3716 0372.

More information on the projects can be found at: http://www.ncver.edu.au/teaching/21008.html?PHPSESSID=1d410770cdbb3f6e90877178ea368345#Projects_in_progress

Reading between the lines: Summing up adult literacy and numeracy research

A fresh assessment of the Australian population's literacy and numeracy skills will become available in 2007 when the results of the International Adult Literacy and Life Skills (IALLS) survey, to be held later this year, are released. As it will be ten years since the previous study, it is timely to sit back and ask ourselves a few questions:

- how much adult literacy and numeracy is occurring in Australia?
- what do the efforts to address adult literacy levels look like?
- what does an improvement in adult literacy and numeracy skills mean for individuals, Australian workplaces and communities?
- what are we doing right and how could we improve practice further?
- whose business is it anyway?

NCVER will address these questions in a series of breakfast briefings in six capital cities, starting in Adelaide on 11 May, in Hobart on 16 May, Melbourne on 17 May, Brisbane on 18 May, Sydney on 19 May and Perth on 23 May, in conjunction with the Training Forum 2006: Skilling for Work. The briefings will draw on recent data on national provision, key findings from the NCVER Adult Literacy Research Program and successful examples of innovative workplace and community literacy provision.

Please see the enclosed flyer with this edition of *Literacy Link.*

The Adult Literacy and Numeracy Research Program is funded under the Adult Literacy National Project by the Australian Government through the Department of Education, Science and Training. For more information contact Jo Hargreaves by email joanne.hargreaves@ncver.edu.au. ■

2006 Adult Literacy National Project

Catherine Gyngell

The Department of Education, Science and Training's (DEST) plan for the 2006 Adult Literacy National Project is once again to support national strategic ventures including NCVER research; Innovative Projects; ACAL and the very important Reading Writing Hotline.

DEST plans to develop and trial a draft Essential Skills Framework based on the work that has been done as part of the National Reporting System (NRS) review. DEST commissioned the NRS review last year to take account of changes in literacy definitions and practice. The NRS has been in use for 10 years and in that time the use of technology as a communication tool has increased significantly. 2004 NCVER research indicated that although the NRS is primarily used for reporting on Commonwealth programs, its use is not limited to this purpose. NRS review consultants were asked to look at the NRS more broadly and see how it could be turned into a framework to cover broader life skills incorporating the increase in technology use in addition to employability skills. Two reporting tools will be developed to sit within this framework and will be used to report language, literacy and numeracy outcomes for the WELL Programme and the Language Literacy and Numeracy Programme. Both the framework and the reporting tools will be trialled in 2006 and consultations will be conducted nationally with industry groups, the ACE sector and training providers.

LiteracyNet will also be reviewed and updated this year for easier use. In recent years a full listing of reports and resources developed under WELL or through Innovative grants has been available on the site, however this list is not database driven and has its limitations. The revised site will provide a full search facility; provide PDF copies of reports and direct links to distributors of resources. Regular users of the site are invited to provide suggestions and feedback on the site redevelopment by emailing Tracey Murphy at Tracey.Murphy@dest.gov.au

The second national adult literacy survey will be conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics later this year, as part of the joint Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey (ALLS) project between the OECD and Statistics Canada. Many other countries are participating in the survey that looks at life-skills i.e. problem solving and the 3 categories of literacy: prose, document and quantitative, that were surveyed in 1996. Australian results won't be available until late 2007 but it will be interesting to compare them with the 1996 ones.

DEST is in the process of calling for applications for the 2006 Innovative projects. Innovation is a word that is used widely these days yet is not always fully understood. Innovation involves coming up with new ideas or inventions that emerge from research and development and feeding these into products or services. Sometimes this involves formulating and trialling completely new ideas but more

often it involves adapting existing ideas and trying them in new environments. Many of the projects funded in recent years are examples of community-based projects where literacy is included as part of programs addressing the particular needs of a target group such as life-skills and nutrition, parenting skills or genealogy. These projects involve collaboration between literacy experts and a range of related community and government-based services. The resulting reports and associated resources provide valuable case studies of successful provision that can be adapted for use nationally. This year the focus for projects is community capacity building and partnership models. ∎

SITN-TALK: Contribute online to CGEA reaccreditation

Liz Davidson

The Certificates in General Education for Adults (CGEA) are being reaccredited in 2006. The project team at the General Studies CMM responsible for the reaccreditation process will be using the SITN-TALK (Service Industries Teacher Network TALK) http://tls.vu.edu.au/cf/sitntalk/main.cfm to communicate and consult with and inform CGEA stakeholders.

SITN-TALK offers CGEA teachers the possibility of sharing resources for teaching and assessment by uploading materials directly, notifying others of meetings and news, and asking questions.

Currently, the SITN-TALK includes:
- Links to the Victorian Qualifications Authority site which outlines accreditation requirements under the AQTF
- Recent research articles relevant to discussions about literacy conceptualisations and curriculum
- Questions and collated responses from previous CGEA Reaccreditation forums
- A (downloadable)survey form for former CGEA students
- A 'FAQ' forum where CGEA users can pose and/or respond to CGEA questions and issues already there.

The project team will use this site throughout 2006 to post details of consultations, post drafts and requests for feedback. It is hoped that SITN-TALK will help keep CGEA stakeholders informed about the progress of the project. It is important that those interested in contributing to the reaccreditation process and/or those wanting to follow discussions are encouraged to check the site at frequent intervals.

Users can view materials on this site without being formally registered but are encouraged to formally register (log on) to SITN-TALK. The project team will be able to contact registered users directly to notify them about particular issues and upcoming events. ∎

National WELL project on Essential Skills: An invitation to comment

Louise Wignall

Innovation and Business Skills Australia (IBSA) develops competency standards and qualifications for workforce skills development and training for the industry areas of Business Services; Cultural and Related Industries; Education; Financial Services; Information and Communication Technologies; and Printing and Graphic Arts. These are complex communication-rich industries that also provide a strong enabling role to a range of Australian businesses.

For a number of months research has been underway as part of a national Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) strategic project. This research is to better understand workplace requirements across industry sectors represented by Innovation and Business Skills Australia (IBSA) and how essential skills such as communication; numeracy; critical thinking and technological know-how, impact on an organisation's workforce capability. Consultation with representatives from key stakeholders such as ACAL and industry and education groups have been held to establish how useful the term 'essential skills' for describing the skills that employers consider important for their enterprises. A resulting action plan is now available for broader comment before being launched in June 2006.

The WELL project drew on current definitions of literacy that take into account new technologies and new ways of working in an increasingly diverse society. The focus of literacy thinking is now on the 'multiple literacies' required by our more complex work and social environment. Fundamentally, literacy is about making meaning from text and the concept of multiple literacies was useful in order to capture the wide range of environments and types of texts that workers might encounter within the IBSA industries. Nine areas emerged as being crucial – critical thinking, information literacy, technological literacy, multimedia literacy, visual literacy, financial literacy, numeracy and spoken and written communication.

At national focus groups industry and education representatives considered these nine areas; the extent of overlap between the skills required in each domain and the slippage in definitions varied greatly. It became clear that definitions of literacy change according to the particular social or workplace context: what it means to be literate will change from person to person, industry to industry, job to job. Therefore, there was not one definition or skill-set that defined a literate employee.

Each of the nine literacies explored in consultation involved engagement with types of 'text', e.g. computer texts, multimedia texts, financial texts, etc. but the importance of each one shifts depending on where people come across them and how they need to use them. What emerged as ▶

essential for IBSA industries is that workers understand the texts that they are working with and the impact that the various texts have within the workplace and on the overall business situation.

The essential skill becomes a matter of critically applying a communication, numeracy, technological skill set within a particular workplace context or job role in order to get the required outcome. IBSA is fast tracking the incorporation of these skills into their Training Packages through the Employability Skills project.

The research and consultation process has resulted in a draft paper and a draft action plan. The draft paper entitled 'ESSENTIAL SKILLS: towards an action plan for 2006-2007 - the case for incorporating essential skills widely in IBSA's products and services' summarises the learning from the research both from a theoretical and workplace perspective. The paper makes the case for incorporating essential skills more widely in IBSA's products and services through a number of strategic interventions. The draft action plan expands on the strategic interventions providing a template for action that will form the basis for implementation work over the next two years.

The draft paper and action plan are now available on the IBSA website www.ibsa.org.au for comment. IBSA would appreciate feedback on these documents directed to louise@louisewignall.com by April 14 2006. ■

Much to learn for everyone

Keiko Yasukawa

After the successful publication of *Blue Sky Bicycle and other journeys* in 2004, the NSW Adult Literacy and Numeracy Council embarked on another writing competition and publication, around the theme of 'luck'. The publication of students' writing from the 2005 competition is called *Red Pocket, Rabbit's Foot* and is now available from the Council.

The project of organising a competition and publication of students' writing has been a rich learning experience for the project committee, teachers whose students participated in the competition, and we feel confident, the students themselves. For the Council Executive who formed the project committee, this was a professional development project. We wanted to provide support to teachers in helping their students write for publication. We had learned a lot about running a competition, editing students' work, preparing and organising a publication from *Blue Sky Bicycle*. So we shared what learned with teachers in a number of ways.

At the 2004 October Council forum, we launched *Blue Sky Bicycle* and all participants were able to see the finished product. We had members of the editorial collective talk

about the process – how entries were judged and what happened in the editing process. This was intended to demystify the editing process, so teachers could in turn explain what happens to their work after they submit it. We modelled the process of introducing the theme of 'luck' to the students with the forum participants. Forum participants brainstormed a range of angles that their students might take in writing about luck. We talked about how this competition can be integrated into literacy classes by examining the different genres that might be used. We even saw how a lesson in numeracy can be integrated into a series of lessons designed around the theme of 'luck'.

We provided Council members with a 'resource pack' of materials they could use to support their design of units of work around writing about 'luck'. Pat Hazell presented a session at the forum, and later published an article in *Literacy and Numeracy Exchange* on the journey she and her students took in participating in the *Blue Sky Bicycle* competition[1]. She shared how she staged the process, some of the dilemmas she faced as a teacher, and the rewards felt by all at the end of the journey. The Council also published ways of using published students' writing in the classroom[2]. We shared the lessons learned from judging entries and editing *Blue Sky Bicycle* and provided clearer guidelines and tips for teachers on what they should check before submitting students' work. These included the importance of checking that the writing met the basic criteria for eligibility so that students' work would actually be considered, rather than deemed ineligible on technical grounds.

We feel confident that the Council's support to teachers had positive impact. We received more than three hundred entries, which was an increase on entries received for *Blue Sky Bicycle*. We had very few entries which did not meet the entry criteria. All entries were read by at least two members of the editorial collective to decide whether they should be included in the publication or not. In cases of uncertainty, a third or even a fourth person would then read the story before a decision was made. With the lessons from *Blue Sky Bicycle*, the path from selection to publication was much smoother, with fewer surprises, panic and angst.

Having received a larger number of entries meant also that there were many more that could not be included in the publication. We know that this inevitably led to much disappointment by student writers and their teachers. Perhaps in the next round, we will need to talk to teachers about ways of explaining to students about the spirit of a 'competition', and other ways of celebrating the efforts put in by all competition participants, for example, by producing a local publication of collected students' work.

We have had some, but will welcome further feedback from teachers so that we can continue to learn and improve the process for round 3. We also invite stories from teachers about how they went about using 'writing for publication' as well as using the finished publication in their teaching. ■

Keiko lectures in adult language, literacy and numeracy education in the Faculty of Education at UTS. She is also on the NSW Adult Literacy and Numeracy Council Executive and is part of the editorial collective for **Red Pocket, Rabbit's Foot.**

Note

1 "Recounting a narrative journey", *Literacy and Numeracy Exchange 2004*, No. 1, pp 51 – 58.

2 "Using *Blue Sky Bicycle* in the classroom", *Literacy and Numeracy Exchange 2004*, No. 1, pp 59 - 60.

Dear Editor

Like Jacqui O'Callaghan (Literacy Link, December 2005), I read with interest James Plumridge's article, 'Why CGEA teachers don't need (and probably shouldn't have) Certificate IV in training and assessment' (Literacy Link, October 2005) and while I don't think CGEA teachers should be required to do all units in the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment, I think there are units that would greatly benefit those new to teaching CGEA (or other accredited adult literacy/numeracy courses).

I am typical of the people James wrote about. I have many years of experience in education and teaching adults, an undergraduate degree, three different qualifications related to education and teaching as well as a Certificate IV in Workplace Assessment and Training. Like many people working in adult education, some of these qualifications were gained some time ago and the initial teaching qualification did not even touch on working with adults. It also did not cover competency based education and assessment – something not even mentioned when I did my initial qualifications. Some of the formal study I have since undertaken has included working with adults and adult literacy but this has partly been due to my interest in this area rather than the course content. I could easily have done a Graduate Diploma in Special Education and a Masters of Education without having covered anything to do with teaching adults or adult literacy.

Much of the content of the Certificate IV in Workplace Assessment and Training I had covered in more detail in other education qualifications. However, the assessment units were not content that I had previously covered in formal study and although I knew about competency based assessment, the practical focus of the Certificate IV ensured that I put into practice the theory I gained both through the course and in previous work and, in a setting that allowed reflection (which work often doesn't), I was able to rethink and refine assessment tools that I had used and/or recommended to others.

For many years I was also involved in delivering professional development sessions to teachers new to the CGEA. These teachers were, in the main, straight from primary or secondary schools with minimal or no experience of teaching adults and limited understanding of VET, and competency based training and assessment. They bring with them ways of teaching that may not be relevant to adults and may even be completely unsuitable for adults who have struggled in traditional school settings. They also bring perceptions and practices of assessment that are far from relevant to competency based assessment and the CGEA. The Certificate IV in Training and Assessment allows qualified school teachers to become familiar with the VET system, to gain knowledge about adult learning, and to gain skills and knowledge of assessment practices appropriate to the (CGEA) students and the system in which they operate.

While some may come with these skills and knowledge, many will not have had the chance to develop skills relevant to the context of the adult literacy and numeracy learner in a TAFE (or other RTO).

Bachelor degrees may ensure 'significant depth' in a 'systematic and coherent body of knowledge' but can't ensure all required and relevant fields of knowledge are covered. We all need to update our knowledge and skills, sometimes in depth and sometimes to gain specific skills and knowledge relevant to the workplace.

While adult literacy and numeracy teachers should be encouraged to undertake relevant post-graduate qualification, they also have a lot to gain from undertaking relevant units in the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment. But at the same time, recognition should be given for the considerable skills these teachers already have. There is no point in skilled teachers doing a course for some bureaucratic purpose. This doesn't increase their skill level or support the skill development of their students.

Jan Hagston

Dear Editor

I would like to comment on some points made by Jacqui O'Callaghan in her response (Literacy Link, December 2005) to my article on literacy teachers and Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (Literacy Link, October 2005). At the same time, I wish to thank Ms O'Callaghan for taking the trouble to respond and thus giving me an opportunity to clarify my remarks.

My article was not intended as an attack on Certificate IV or those who deliver or hold it. Certificate IV is an essential qualification for VET lecturers working with training packages. My argument was that teachers delivering the CGEA are involved in teaching, not training. They already know how to teach and assess students and will find more specific guidance in the accreditation document and at moderation. They have (or should have) qualifications that the AQF recognises as being at a higher level than Certificate IV. It is pointless and wasteful to insist on Certificate IV as an additional qualification. Far better instead to insist that CGEA teachers upgrade their teaching qualifications in specialist areas relevant to their work.

Ms O'Callaghan's main point is that qualified teachers, especially those from secondary schools, often do not have a firm grasp of adult learning principles. Readers will make up their own minds about that. Most will agree with her, as I do, that many CGEA students have had bad experiences at school and in consequence suffer anxieties about learning. They will also agree that without proper understanding and support from their teachers those students will find it just as hard or even harder to succeed in an adult learning environment as at school.

However, I dispute Ms O'Callaghan's assertion that teachers need Certificate IV to learn about working with adults. If CGEA teachers are deficient in that respect, the best thing would be for them to study for tertiary level qualifications in adult literacy or adult education. Only a small fraction of Certificate IV is concerned with 'adult learning principles'. Supposing we concede that teachers would benefit from that fraction, why force them to obtain the whole certificate? That simply doesn't make sense.

James Plumridge

◄ *Dear Editor,*

ACAL's Brisbane forum Rethinking Literacies: Literacy and numeracy across the domains of social life presented me with an opportunity and a challenge. While I am drawn to the notion of a set of essential skills that can be bounded and easily articulated, I struggle to see a fruitful link between a complex and dynamic view of literacy and numeracy and notions of essential skills.

Nevertheless the forum gave me an opportunity to grapple with this tension, and broaden my thinking and my perspective. It was a pleasure to engage with participants who were willing to grapple with and try to tease out some elemental concepts: whether we can make a list of skills that individuals and communities need to survive and thrive in the future, given the complexity of human interactions; what the relationship is between a life-long/life-wide approach to literacy and numeracy, as advocated by ACAL, and an essential skills framework; whether an essential skills framework has any application beyond the workplace; and what the place of literacy and numeracy would be in such a framework, if it were feasible to compile such a framework.

The moments that struck chords for me in the day were numerous, and as I found myself nodding vigorously at some ideas I noticed there were many around me doing the same. One example was Sharon Brown's thoughtful and thought-provoking description of her work with 'disengaged' youth, which so clearly demonstrated the importance of grounding practice in the lived experience of individuals and communities, and using this as a springboard.

Another example was Ruth Henderson's description of the relationship between the world of care and literacy. Ruth clearly articulated the growing complexity of accountability processes for workers in the care industry and the consequences of these changes. Not only are workers required to use and understand increased documentation but the language used in government documents is increasingly deterring neighbours or other community support members from providing volunteer assistance.

I have given just two brief snapshots of my impressions of a day rich in thinking and collaborative explorations of varying approaches to literacy and numeracy. There are many more discussions for us to have about ways to work with individuals and communities, and extend the research base of approaches to literacy and numeracy.

I believe the focus for us will be on continuing to build the knowledge and resources so that next time we hear Joy Cumming talk about her work with courts and mediation, she will no longer have to recount the story of a client who would prefer to go to jail rather than identify the need for help with literacy and numeracy.

Pauline O'Maley
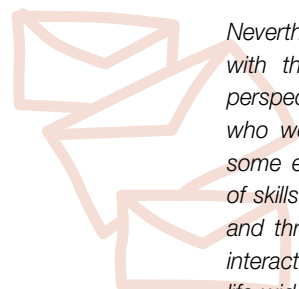
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