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Editorial

Welcome to the third edition of Fine Print for 1998! During the year, we have sought to reconsider fundamental questions about the nature of ALBE by examining in detail the key terms in our name: Adult; Literacy; Basic; and Education. In this spring edition, we look at the idea of Basic in ALBE.

Getting 'back to basics' is generally the catchcry of conservatives who, at a failure to explain economic and social division in any other way, choose to lampoon education as somehow out of touch and too concerned with 'trendy theory'. In this nostalgic fog, there is an imagined time when teaching readin' ritin' and rithmatic was done 'properly'. The Basic in Adult Literacy and Basic Education has never been so reductionist. It has always been a slippery term and, in this edition, we have aimed to 'get back to 'basics' and tease out just what the idea of a 'basic' education means.

When we originally conceived the themes for this year, we loosely had in mind that there existed some distinction between the Literacy and Basic in ALBE - that Literacy was more to do with the examination of language and its structures and Basic was to do with the content of what we choose to teach. In this context, the question seemed to be: What knowledge is it important to have in the late 1990s? However, as the articles here show, such a distinction is difficult to make and 'basic' content knowledge is only one of a set of 'basic' considerations that teachers and students take with them into a 'classroom'.

And of course, there is little that is static in education. What is considered to be 'basic' knowledge shifts across time. Philippa McLean writes of the move away from the concentration on the 'personal' expression in the 1980s to the more general subject based courses which aim to provide the content that many students have missed because of disrupted schooling. Even within the last ten years, with the development of the CGEA and other certificates, the idea of what is 'basic' knowledge has been continually renewed. Delia Bradshaw discusses the ever changing definitions within general ALBE classes throughout the 1990s - from the idea of "creative, critical and connected thinking" to an ever broadening notion of open ended, potentially transformative, questions which, amongst other things, "identify and integrate existing and emerging personal, local, national and global perspectives …". Clearly we are a long way from the idea of 'basic' education referred to at the beginning of this editorial.

Just what is 'basic' knowledge is also affected by the particular learning context. Novela Trbic looks at the idea of 'basic' education in an industry setting and she suggests that, apart from individual learners' needs, there are institutional imperatives defining what is 'basic' knowledge. The affect of external institutional demands on education is also reflected in an interview with Chris Tully who speaks about how legislative change to meet international standards alters what is 'basic' numeracy knowledge for farmers. And Sue Chamberlain reflects on her work with youth and how for her, 'basic' education must prepare young people to "negotiate a broad range of organisational and social structures" and, in times of twenty percent unemployment, it must "improve self esteem regardless of whether or not it leads to paid employment".

In their articles on 'basic' numeracy and 'basic' education in an ESL-Literacy setting, Beth Marr and Gayle Morris respectively consider the tensions they see between the teachers' and students' views about what is 'basic'. Beth suggests that while teachers in general agree that the CGEA accurately represents necessary numeracy skills, the difficulty is in finding the language and examples which 'connect' to each learner's life to make the content meaningful. Here, it is the classroom processes put in place to achieve this which are at the centre of what is 'basic'. Gayle is quite explicit about this and she maintains that 'basic' education is "as much about the concepts and social practices learned in a learning environment as the subjects themselves." She suggests that teachers need to throw their own practices into questions if they are to be serious about valuing learners' points of view.

This is no easy matter of course, as Veronica Volkoff and Barry Golding's research shows, learners' perceptions of what is important for them is also constantly changing as they move through education, and many of their 'outcomes' are to do with a sense of personal achievement as much as to do with having learnt anything in particular.

Clearly, when we discuss what makes for a 'basic' education we are not talking about something basic at all. Every educational setting is a complex and shifting meeting place of ideas, processes and personalities, and just what is 'basic' in any given situation will have to be negotiated at some level. Perhaps it is this constant negotiation, and evaluation and renewal, of our practice that is most basic of all.

The Editorial Group

What is a basic education?

In this article, a number of practitioners in the field consider the notion of what it is we really mean when we say we are teaching 'basic education'. As you will see, it is a term which raises different meanings in different contexts.

Speaking Basically

by Delia Bradshaw (with additional comments by Philippa McLean, Gabrielle Mahony and Nancy Jones)

"When I first began work in the ALBE field in 1980, we spent a lot of time working with students once a week in small groups or in a one-to-one setting. The major concentration was on students' personal writing, a belief that a student's low literacy level was probably reflected in a low self-esteem. We thought a focus on the self-expression domain would make a student "feel better". We began to realise that we were only meeting some of the needs of our students. They required a wider range of transferable literacy skills to utilise in a range of settings in their lives.

We began advising our students that rather than doing more of the same (i.e. English and Maths), we thought they would benefit from doing a range of subjects such as Psychology, Australian History, Politics, Civics, etc. Part of what lay behind this advice was teachers' belief s that students lack of knowledge in a range of areas set up a barrier to learning and engagement in their personal and civic life - for employment and further study. Now the great bulk of students are doing between five and twenty hours a week and most are combining a General Curriculum Option with core maths or English classes. Currently or most popular GCO is computers because students and teachers see this as area as part of what is 'basic' education." *Philippa McLean, Teacher/Student coordinator, CAE*

I've always preferred the term Adult Literacy and Basic Education because this name makes the 'basic education' explicit. I don't like to think 'basic education' might disappear or be left to chance. To trace the origins of what 'basic education' means to me, I've decided to re-visit four moments in my life as an adult educator, four occasions on which I was struggling to find the words that would adequately describe our aspirations as Adult Literacy and Basic Education workers. This pocket history is a way of showing how my ideas about 'basic education' have evolved over the years. This narrative shows how this configuration of theories and practices that I call 'basic education' keeps attracting new ideas into its orbit at the same time as it is also constantly redefining or giving new interpretations to older ideas.

November 1990

At this time, I was coordinator of the Adult Literacy and Basic Education Program at the Council of Adult Education with nearly 500 students and over 30 part-time tutors. As a way of developing a collective educational ethos, and supported by my colleagues, I put together a 22 page document called *Making Connections* that spelt out the educational framework for our work. Its opening line, the primary reference point for all our educational endeavours at that time, declared:

> "It is the primary responsibility of CAE's Adult Literacy and Basic Education program to create and sustain a learning environment in which the development of creative, critical and connected thinking is at the core of developing literacy".

This declaration was based on the belief that "creative, critical and connected thinking" is the heart and soul of 'basic education'. It attested that such thinking is vital if we are to move beyond knowledge and understandings that were absorbed uncritically in childhood if we are to move towards considering alternatives. This in-house manifesto advocated that critical thinking infuse all subjects in the CAE ALBE program (maths, health for women, Australian studies, psychology, road rules, geography, science, Australian history, cooking and computers) and not just those with English, Literacy, Reading and Writing in their name.

March 1993

I had just finished working on the Adult Basic Education Accreditation Framework, the foundation document for the later Certificates in General Education for Adults. In an article for *Good Practice in Adult Literacy* called "Powerful Discourses", I tried to sketch the possibilities inherent in the ABEAF document for a robust and comprehensive adult basic education curriculum, one that shunned minimalist statements and piecemeal approaches. The article explained how the ABEAF curriculum model was based on the belief term 'literacy' (the acquisition of multiple discourses) implies meaning making that ensures access to two basic fundamentals: first, to the often taken for granted background knowledge (conventionally understood to be the province of basic education) assumed by texts; second, to the values embedded in this knowledge.

As I wrote then:

"For example, reading and writing texts about personal experience and self-validation, calls forth encounters with concepts such as 'self' 'identity', 'personality', 'culture' and 'society'. It's not long before these lead to contact with and discussions about frequently recurring social and intellectual issues such as nature or nurture, dependence and independence, pluralism and conformity, parenting and health. These discussions, in turn, necessitate familiarity with ideas such as 'identity crisis' or 'human development' or multiculturalism' and many other 'isms'. And not only familiarity with concepts, values, issues and ideas, but also ways of identifying how the text constructs a particular view of these concepts, values, issues and ideas. For students learning how to spot how texts construct sexism, racism and ethnocentrism, and learning to notice how language embodies a particular persona or stance or point of view, it becomes critical to know whose voice is speaking, representing what culture, what gender, what class, what age, and hence, from what position or perspective."

'Basic education' had extended to being 'multi-discursive'.

October 1994

I was leading a discussion as part of the Science and Technology Literacy Professional Development Course. The topic for the day was: 'What, in the late 20th century, are the characteristics of an educated person?'. For me, this constituted defining what we meant by a 'basic', foundation or a rounded general education. The discussion concluded that four intertwined aspects were of fundamental significance – key concepts or keywords, subject knowledge, cognitive skills and personal attributes.

Examples of key concepts proposed were 'democracy', 'justice', 'environment', 'freedom' and 'Asia'; the subject knowledges (in some places called 'core' curriculum studies) listed included geography, history, economics, civics, media studies and aesthetics; some of the thinking or cognitive skills highlighted were conceptualising, problematising and critiquing; and the personal attributes specified were connected with being ethical, open and tolerant.

If 'basic education' were to engage with the big issues of our times (Peace/Violence; Poverty/Wealth; Degradation/Conservation; Competition/Cooperation), as all agreed it should, then the fabric of basic education classes and programs had to be multidimensional, multi-discursive and multi-disciplinary.

Adults learners want to fit in; to be a part of the "club" of people who have a formal education

"I like Delia's reference to the "four intertwined aspects" of a rounded general education i.e. "key concepts or keywords, subject knowledge, cognitive skills and personal attributes".

When you ask adults what they want from education, they usually refer to at least one of these aspects: "I want to get my brain working", "I want to get the education I missed out on", "I left school at twelve and I feel embarrassed about my lack of education", "I want to improve my self esteem".

Adult learners want to fit in; to be part of the "club" of people who have a formal education. They want to learn the language and ways of thinking that will give them access to social and vocational opportunities they are denied at present and they rely on us as teachers to help them fill in the gaps and to know the steps they need to take."
Gabrielle Mahony, Teacher, CAE

December 1997

This was the publication date of *Transforming Lives, Transforming Communities*, a conceptual framework for further education curriculum that I prepared for the Adult, Community and Further Education Board. Distilling the thoughts and values of many adult educators from around the world, I listed eight lifelong learning goals for further education (including adult basic education) practitioners and students. The eight goals are to:

- understand complex systems which interact unpredictably;
- identify and integrate existing and emerging personal, local, national and global perspectives;
- prosper with difference, paradox and multiple sets of realities;
- see and make connections between the past, the present and the future;
- encourage sustainability in relationships and the environment;
- re-invent the self, privately and publicly, civically and occupationally, throughout life;
- extend learning styles and repertoires;
- develop insights through questioning by asking 'Why?' and 'What if?' as well as 'What?' and 'How?'.

A close inspection of these goals revealed four recurring patterns or themes to which I gave the names Multiplicity, Connectedness, Critical Intelligence and Transformation. These four principles, for me indicators of 'quality' adult basic

education, work together interdependently, whatever the topic, subject or discipline. In practice, learners and teachers assemble alternative perspectives, explanations and possibilities (Multiplicity); then together they make connections between these and beyond these (Connectedness); as well, they ask questions about these (Critical Intelligence);all the while, learners and teachers consolidate by determining and taking thoughtful action that makes a difference personally, locally, nationally and/or globally (Transformation).

So by early 1998, 'basic education' had expanded still more. By then it had come to mean the fusion of knowledge, understanding, values reflection, critical analysis, behaviours and skills necessary for making a significant contribution towards the creation of individual and collective futures.

> "How do we develop in our students the conceptual skills to analyse, to see connections, to understand the underlying reason for a point of view and to question? Early this year in class, we were talking about the Australian Republican Convention in Canberra. This naturally led into a discussion about our parliamentary system. At this stage there was a lack of enthusiasm for the topic - "politics is boring", "voting is a waste of time", etc. - and there was obviously much confusion about our three levels of government. The dilemma for me was should I abandon the topic or try to find another way to explore the issues and responsibilities of citizenship? I felt an understanding of the roles of local, state and federal government was a 'basic' or 'necessary' knowledge for the late 1990s, so, instead of plodding or leaving the topic, I decided to use opportunities over several months to explore our system of government.
>
> These are some of the activities that developed in the class: a guided tour of the Victorian Parliament House; a visit to the electoral education centre; taking opposites sides in an argument; making lists of "for" and "against' becoming a republic; role playing the people involved in a situation in local government e.g. the removal of small houses for a block of expensive units.
>
> All these topics gave the students opportunities to ask "Why?", "How?" and "What?" To me, this is "basic education": making connections and developing critical intelligence so students are able to transfer their knowledge to understand and take action in society."
> *Nancy Jones, Teacher, CAE*

July 1998

Today, looking back on these four moments, what do I see?

Certainly, I see a number of threads running through these attempts to sketch the characteristics of adult basic education, with each statement providing a foundation or 'given' for the next. I also see how each successive statement has been prompted by the insufficiencies of the one before, often giving attention to areas only previously hinted at or not explored in enough depth. The main thread I see is a preference for integration over fragmentation, for being able to know and to hold both the detail and the big picture. Let me finish with an example.

Let us imagine that adult basic education students are studying 'Melbourne'. In my view, they need both a close-up view and a long-distance, wide-angle view. Not only do they need to know what is located where (through brochures, maps and excursions, whether visited and inspected electronically or physically) but equally importantly they need to know how Melbourne is connected (geographically, culturally, politically, economically, technologically, historically) to its immediate surroundings, the country as a whole and the world beyond.

At the same time as doing this, learners need to develop the habit of asking questions through asking "Why?" and "What if?" as well as "What?" and "How?". For example, when learning about transport (which inevitably leads to housing and employment and community identity and potentially everything else), as well as asking "How do most people travel to work?" and "What is the cheapest way to travel around Melbourne?", learners also need to consider "Why are land and housing more expensive in some Melbourne suburbs than in others?" and "What if the price of petrol doubled and/or public transport fares were reduced in Melbourne?" or "What if languages other than English were prohibited?" Prompted by such investigations, learners are encouraged to go on and ask: "What's all this mean to me and my community?" "What am I going to do about it?"

Whenever we are thinking about what adult basic education students need to know, we are inevitably led to think about what adult basic education teachers need to know. In these fragmented times, how do we, the adult basic education workers, get to see the bigger picture and ask the questions: "What if?" What if we named our work differently? What if we dared to speak out loud and long about the dangers (and huge costs) of a minimalist and piecemeal approach to adult education? What if ...?

***Delia Bradshaw** has worked as an adult educator for over twenty years. She continues to believe that the classroom is a powerful site, one with the potential for initiating and aiding personal and social transformations of significance.*

References

Good Practice in Adult Literacy, No 18, March 1993 p.2

Making Connections, CAE, Melbourne, November 1990, p.1

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So far we have considered what is basic in general adult education classes, but does what is 'basic' differ for specific student groups?

What's 'basic' for people with a disability?

by Neil Blenkiron

When looking at the basic educational needs for people with a disability, the key word is people. Generally, there is no difference in the type of information that has to be taught. The type of information required is that which is needed by any person to operate within mainstream society. Apart from the ability to communicate in clear English, the ability to use computers and the development of basic social skills needs to be addressed.

However, one of the biggest needs of a person with a disability is the ability to deal with their disability within a social context. The ability to deal with the disability as well as the ability to deal with the reactions of other people to the disability can be one of the greatest barriers that needs to be addressed. This can be dealt with by improving communication skills, assertion and self esteem.

Although the content does not necessarily change, the context and methods of teaching do. The teaching style needs to be adapted to meet the individual needs of the person; different disabilities require different approaches. Someone with a short attention span requires frequent changes in the type of information they have to deal with. Moving from passive to active exercises allows them to access the information without losing concentration. A person with an intellectual disability requires reinforcement over a longer period of time.

> 'Teaching in any context is a team effort, this is even more evident in the context of teaching people with a disability'

Given that it may take longer for a person with a disability to learn the necessary material, a long term view is needed. Constantly ask yourself: "Why am I teaching this?", "What is the purpose behind this and how will the student use this information once they have moved on from the class room?" Move from general concepts to specific examples. Keep the content real, relevant and related to the student's life and culture. Be aware that different cultures may perceive disabilities in different ways. This will affect the way you teach the student and the way they perceive themselves and their abilities.

Overall, a holistic approach is needed. Working with the student, their family, careers and professional advisors will enable you to build up an individualised education plan. Being aware of the major issues faced by people with a disability, and being able to ask the person what they need in terms of an environment conducive to their learning, will enable both of you to work as a team. The holistic approach allows for integration of the knowledge gained in the classroom into other aspects of the student's life. Teaching in any context is a team effort, this is even more evident in the context of teaching people with a disability.

Neil Blenkiron is a freelance writer based in Melbourne. He is a person with a learning disability.

What's 'basic' in the workplace?

by Novela Trbic

The content of Industry certificates (Food Processing, Vehicle Industry etc) and competency standards reflect a belief that there are certain basic skills that all people working in that industry, and indeed across industries, should know. In terms of the Food Industry, core or basic skills reflect a mixture of key industry content areas (hygiene, quality and safety) and the underlying assumption that adults also need to possess basic skills in literacy and numeracy (industrial communication and calculations) particularly at Australian Quality Framework (AQF) levels 2/3.

The importance of teaching people basic skills (literacy/numeracy) and integrating them in any training cannot be overestimated in terms of its potential impact on operators' future employment mobility. The nature of future work organisations (the shift from hierarchical to flatter work structures and the impact of technological innovations) will require a literate workforce and this raises some serious considerations for industry educators in terms of ensuring that industry students are given the support they need in order to acquire basic skills.

Teachers also need knowledge of the production process and the skills used by employees in performing their daily work functions to assist in developing activities that relate to the job and that can be done on or off the job. For example, numeracy activities that can be completed as product is weighed, packed and placed on pallets, or calculation activities that relate to product testing that is performed on a daily basis in the lab.

It is also important to understand the organisational structure (if it is hierarchical or teams based) and what support structures are in place to complement teaching and learning in the workplace. For example, when teaching students how to write an agenda and record meeting minutes, if this skill is not practised on the job, students quickly forget and lose confidence. However, if there are real and regular

opportunities in the workplace for them to use these skills then they are much more likely to progress faster and gain self-confidence at the same time.

There is a need to be aware of a shift from a focus on inputs (classes/hours) in training to outputs (performance). At the individual, team and organisational levels, training providers are under growing pressure to demonstrate their organisational value in these terms. Hence, there is a focus on skill standards, measurement and evaluation and assessment in the workplace.

Industry imperatives necessitate a creative approach to teaching and learning, one that simultaneously manages to retain quality teaching and learning outcomes and also reflects flexible delivery options, enabling those who prefer (and have the basic skills) to learn through self-paced materials. However, it is also important to acknowledge that this approach is not suitable for all learners, particularly for those students who are beginning to learn basic reading and writing.

Perhaps what is most 'basic' of all is educating managers about the time and effort needed in order to acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills, and the value of a long term approach to training and learning which has tangible benefits to the individual and to the company. It is also about utilising traditional informal learning structures in the workplace and combining these with focused learning objectives from accredited certificates to enhance learning opportunities.

'Perhaps what is most 'basic' of all educating managers about the time and effort needed in order to acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills'

Novela Trbic is Training Coordinator at Sugar Australia

What's basic for young people?

by Sue Chamberlain

In a time when young people have a very 'basic' and intimate knowledge of the personal impact of 20 per cent youth unemployment, to me, 'basic' and 'necessary' knowledge for young people in the late 1990s is the ability to successfully negotiate a broad range of organisational and social structures. They need the confidence and self esteem to view themselves, others and existence as a worthwhile and meaningful, and they need to be able to identify opportunities for growth and the skills to learn from life experiences. It is imperative that they have the competence to critically analyse information and make informed life decisions about a range of personal and social issues with an understanding of diverse perspective's within a democratic social construct.

While these are my personal biases for what constitutes 'basic' and 'necessary' knowledge for young people, currently funded programs for this group favour a vocational educational model which includes job skills, specific industry training and using technology. To this, add the individual young people themselves and, with the age of youth spanning 15 to 25, the aspirations of individuals within any given group vary considerably. Therefore, the skills and knowledge offered within programs targeted to young people will operate more effectively when a flexible approach to delivery is adopted to ensure the needs of those actually enrolled are addressed. That is, while a vocational curriculum will project certain expected learning outcomes, the skills actually sought and gained by the participant may differ somewhat.

A problem with this emphasis on vocational education is the notion that education and training for young people leads to paid employment. Clearly vocational skills and personal development training does not, in itself, create employment, so 'necessary' knowledge may need to include the understanding that being job ready, motivated and highly skilled will not necessarily ensure a paid job and that short term, and casual employment may be the employment norm. There is a need for support for endeavours which improve self esteem regardless of whether it leads to paid employment and view achievement of personal goals as a positive contribution to society.

And then of course there is also the issue of what 'basic' knowledge teachers need to have. Regardless of the curriculum planned, the 'hands on' delivery of adult education for young people also requires teachers to consider the 'classroom' implications of the age, maturity and past educational experience of participants. They need to have considered the impact of long term unemployment such as social isolation and lack of confidence. There might also be a lack of parental/family support and nurturing, possibly because of homelessness or lack of suitable/stable housing. There are sometimes drugs and alcohol issues, mental and general health issues and juvenile justice issues. As well as all of these, there are cultural differences and diversity which make generalisations difficult.

Delivery of basic education to young people is a dynamic aspect of adult education requiring tutors to create flexible classroom structures offering both a range of personal development skills as well as vocational and job skills training within an environment which offers support and respect for their individual journeys to adulthood.

Sue Chamberlain is at Preston and Reserviour Adult Community Education

a journal of adult english language and literacy education

Basic Instincts: Some thoughts on reconceptualising the 'basic' in complex times

by Gayle Morris

Gayle Morris asks teachers to consider how they decide what is to be included in a 'basic' education in the particular context of ESL-Literacy classes.

Context

From the outset I want to put forth my sense of what basic education is. For me basic education implies those foundations essential for personal development, forms of social participation, citizenship, further study, employment and retraining. But it also is a term that suggests a process; it's as much about the concepts and social practices learned in a learning environment than the subjects themselves. Yet I am no longer assured that my understanding is sufficiently complex enough to withstand the rigours and reality of my learners. By writing this article I hope to throw my own practice into question and by doing so to create a space in which to reflect more broadly upon the construction of basic education. It is within the context of ESL Literacy that the following discussion is situated, a teaching learning environment which blurs traditional distinctions between what constitutes an ESL learner or Literacy learner and moreover what constitutes 'basic education' in this context.

'I hope to put forth some considerations for current practice that move the 'basic' into complex and contested terrain'

I want to conceive for a moment of 'basic' in several ways. First, as the title of the paper suggests, there is an almost intuitive reading of the learner which may act to shape the curriculum in ways that narrow and limit rather than extend. I will argue that our 'construction' or 'reading' of the learner and our 'reading' of literacy is in part reflected in our 'construction' of basic education and thus has implications for curriculum. Second, I wish to explore how the notion of basic education is taken up in the context of the English as a second language classroom with adult literacy learners. Finally, I wish to reflect on my 'reading' of the current policy context of Vocational Education and Training in terms of the impact on basic education. By drawing all three threads together I hope to put forth some considerations for current practice that moves the 'basic' into complex and contested terrain.

Basic Instinct

It has always struck me as significant and telling, that many learners themselves see the technical aspects of literacy development as a way in to what I would consider the broader concepts of basic education, not as ends in themselves. It is through learners development in writing or reading that wider achievements are made - an understanding of the social practices of schooling, greater social or community participation, or an enhanced self of well-being. For many learners success is measured by achievement of these kinds. But then again, perhaps they reflect only what all good practitioners already know, that literacy is neither a subject nor skill that can be learnt in isolation from context and content. I am always reminded of McCormack's statement that "adults with literacy problems do not need something called literacy, they need an education. It is this that their literacy problems have deprived them of." (1992, p.228)

The learner's experience in these respects resonates with current research which highlights the need for us to reconceptualise literacy as a set of social and cultural practices as opposed to the individual skill paradigm. This conceptual shift moves the focus away from individual, discrete skills to reading and writing as cultural practices and allows for multiple literacy practices. It follows then that we need to see learners as bringing a range of literacy resources to the learning environment, albeit not necessarily recognised, articulated or readily understood. Doing so allows us to recognise and teach for a number of engagements that previously may not have been validated.

It could be argued that within my area of ESL Literacy, there exists certain conceptions of the literacy learner and of literacy that narrow the expectations of teachers and classroom experiences. As Martin Prinsloo reminds us:

> "... this conception of adult il-literacy assumes a cognitive and performative deficit in adults without schooling, which is at odds with the complexity of dispositions and capabilities displayed by this heterogeneous group." (1996, p.15)

In other words, there still exists a lack of awareness or understanding that leads us to construct adult literacy learners in deficit terms or in ways that don't fully allow for the broadest representation of the learner. The Streets (1991) argue that

'school literacy' tends to define what counts as literacy, and that this constructs the lack of 'school literacy' in deficit terms. Yet clearly, how we construct literacy and the learner impacts in several significant aspects of the teaching/learning environment, from our expectations of the learner, to the program we design, to the materials we choose, to the way we teach. Such assumptions spill over onto decisions about what to include or exclude, be that implicitly or explicitly within the curriculum. As Davison notes:

> "A practitioner who sees language and literacy as a purely cognitive process rather than embedded in social or cultural practices will have a much narrower curriculum ..." (1996, p. 55)

The construction of the ESL Literacy learner can often presuppose characteristics of the learner no longer representative or inclusive of the diverse range of learners that exist. This, despite all that has been written about ESL Literacy and the pedagogical differences and similarities of adult literacy and English as a Second Language. Perhaps as Bill Langlands argues, it is that our entire model of literacy education in western education is "predicated on the assumption that students have a social, cultural and historical background of literacy, a literate tradition." (1997, p.19). Although specifically addressing his concerns about indigenous traditions and academic expectations, he suggests that certain other groups of non-indigenous students, particularly those who come from oral traditions, may well not succeed in the Australian education system. He refers to histories written by students that point to the inability of teachers to accommodate the social, cultural and historical backgrounds of indigenous students. He notes:

> "Many teachers find it difficult to conceive that belief in the efficacy of literacy and academic skills is culturally based and that its value is not self evident to indigenous people who have grown up outside the writing based system of which schooling, and most modern employment, is a part." (1997, p.20)

'The construction of the ESL Literacy learner can often presuppose characteristics of the learner no longer representative or inclusive of the diverse range of learners that exist'

In other words, there may be an incongruity between, on the one hand, the implicit value a teacher places on the ability to read and write and, on the other hand, what the learners value. Luke refers to what he terms using our own self-reproductive assumptions about literacy despite often profound changes in our learners. (1994, p.4) As he reminds us,

> "Reading and writing are so deeply ingrained in post-industrial cultures that they appear 'natural' and invisible aspects of everyday life. We seldom stop to inquire about what reading and writing are, who has which capabilities with and access to texts, and how reading and writing are shaped by and shape our social and economic paths." (1994, p.3)

In the overall discussion of basic education it's important to keep at the forefront questions about how our practice can be narrowed and constrained by our own assumptions or basic instincts and further how our own ideologies and interests inevitably frame what we do.

Basic Education & ESL

Within current ESL programs generally there is a concerted effort to broaden curriculums, to include options or content areas which extend students' language development and specialised knowledge into vocational training contexts, such as retail, hospitality, tourism, building, Australian work culture etc. However, often the choices reflect the current preoccupation with building the foundations for employment and retraining and less with offering a more broad based education. It's questionable whether extending students into vocational options or expanding language use through a broader context is the same as providing basic education. Certainly ESL has been broadened, with a greater emphasis on language in context, language as social and culturally situated practice and therefore a corresponding broadening of content areas through which language is taught. The critical difference may lie in the fact that many adult ESL learners come to the ESL environment not in need of concepts, but of language, cultural information and an understanding of language in use. These learners may often have an extensive experience of school and have well-developed literacy and numeracy in their first language.

This is not the experience of all ESL learners. Many adults from non-English speaking backgrounds lack a basic education and may have no or minimal first language literacy or formal education. Many of the latter need the help of the type that Adult Basic Education offers and more, since they do not speak the language of the community communication either. But the experience of ESL Literacy students will be shaped by the very ESL contexts in which they find themselves, as adult learners most recently.

It could be argued that the construct of basic education that I've put forward is predicated on a set of assumptions about what adult learners 'should' have, and further, that such assumptions are informed by western notions of 'schooling'. This is where as a teacher working in an ESL Literacy classroom things become murky and complex. If I accept that basic education represents at least foundations necessary for employment, retraining, further study, citizenship and other forms of social participation, and further, that basic education is as much a process, where is the room for alternative constructions? Alternatives that could, for example, interrogate the print-based focus that basic education usually has, not its breadth of context.

It's also important to consider the notion of speaking for and about learners without always having meaningful processes in place to check our assumptions against their expressed or felt needs. Recently when developing the curriculum for a full time ESL Literacy class, I made decisions about what content areas to include and to exclude (so much for the negotiated curriculum!). This isn't to suggest that the content areas that I mapped out won't be transformed or recreated as both learners and I act on them. However, by fixing content areas on the timetable, such as 'Community Access' or 'Australian Society and Issues' I have set my own assumptions in ink in a way that may make it more difficult to throw curriculum open for negotiation. When it comes to choosing, the more educationally disadvantaged the learner is, the more likely we as teachers are to take control of the curriculum and engage learners in content or activities that may be inappropriate, demeaning or limiting of their educational experience. It says more about us and our perception of the learner than what the individual learner might need.

'Basic education by necessity must be broad enough to reflect the diversity and heterogeneous nature of the learner and of context'

In teacher discourse where "They need ...?" "They should have . . .?" "I don't think they ..." is often heard, the issue for me is how do we foreground the learner in a way that doesn't superimpose one set of assumptions on another? Particularly within the area of ESL Literacy where there may not be a shared language for communication, the greater is our responsibility as teachers to broaden our understanding and awareness of our learners. As Weinstein-Shr suggests,

> "For our work as adult educators to be effective, it is essential to take into account not only the functions of the language and literacy in learners' lives but also the relationship that create the contexts for language use, the needs of adults and the resources they have for meeting these needs." (1993, p 519)

Because ESL Literacy learners are often asked to meet educational agendas set by others, including teachers, it's important to consider whether or not they share these agendas and whether or not they are provided with the means to meet them.

Basic Education & VET

Recent developments within the vocational education and training policy (VET) framework are relevant to the concept of basic education, specifically the dominance of language for employment and training related goals and the corresponding shift away from the emphasis on affective outcomes. In this process learners are increasingly becoming homogenised, with a shift away from an emphasis on learner diversity and complexity to learner commonality and simplicity. This can be seen most notably in notions of 'common competencies' and the view that all learners must meet such competencies.

In such an ethos it becomes increasingly difficult to sustain ESL Literacy programs responsive to and inclusive of difference and not framed in a narrow vocational sense. The pressure to generate outcomes further compounds this, as outcomes are increasingly interpreted narrowly as articulation into employment, further training or study.

A short anecdote serves to exemplify this tension. During last year's Adult Learners Week Dr. Shahzrad Mojab of the University of Toronto quoted a migrant women who was asked to reflect on her educational experiences. She stated, "We're pushed to use our hands not our head." Such a comment serves to remind us of a lack of space within the current paradigm for ESL Literacy other than within a narrow band of prescribed work-related activities and the implications for those farthest from the mainstream. It's timely to reflect on what basic education means, not solely in terms of pedagogy or curriculum but in the broader policy context given the pressures from funding bodies to report on outcomes of adult literacy in simplistic terms that detract from the complex nature of basic education.

Basic education by necessity must be broad enough to reflect the diversity and heterogenous nature of the learner and of context. It must foreground the learner in the process, and be fluid and responsive to allow for negotiation. We need to move from a static, homogeneous conceptualisation in favour of one that is fluid, responsive and inclusive. It seems to me, rather than building programs and teaching practice based on our own cultural assumptions about basic education, we have to start where people are, and build on their cultural meaning and use of literacy practices in diverse cultural and ideological contexts.

The challenge is to reconceptualise basic education as a multi-faceted and multilayered construct. By doing so may allow us to break down artificial boundaries and allows us to rethink 'basic education' appropriate for the ESL Literacy learner.

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Making connections; listening to the voices of adult numeracy students

by Beth Marr

Beth Marr takes a look at what learners and teachers consider to be the 'necessary' maths and she suggests that teachers need to listen closely to ensure they are talking about the same thing.

Kuhn, "We see through the eyes of past experience"

"When I came into this class in the middle of the semester I realised that they'd learned about diameters and things like that ... things that I didn't even know that I didn't know ... I always say to myself that I want to know the basics of maths. But now I think What is the basics? What is it that you want to understand?".

Claire had been in CGEA Mathematics and Numeracy classes for nine months when she reflected on this question. It seemed the more she realised the scope of mathematics the less sure she was of what she wanted from it. I think her dilemma is well worth contemplating.

Recently, through two research projects - a case study of students in a TAFE level 3/4 mathematics class and an evaluation of the revised CGEA curriculum one year into its implementation - I have had the privilege of being in other teachers' classes and talking to students about their perceptions of mathematics and what is important to them. As I grapple to make sense of it myself I thought it might be interesting to share their views with others in the context of the question of this edition of Fine Print: "What is basic?"

The CGEA survey indicates that we have got the maths right. From the teachers' point of view anyway. Those surveyed seemed content that it includes the mathematics skills that are important for students to acquire, expressed in a way that reflects desirable teaching practice (with some reservations about level four). However, it was what I heard from the students that caused me concern. Now teachers have reached agreement on mathematical content, the next question is "How can teachers make sure that their vision of the mathematics, of what is useful and important, is actually shared with the students?"

The students did not express dissatisfaction with their courses, teachers or the methods they used. However the limited view of maths many of them seemed to be taking away from the classes alarmed me somewhat. When asked questions about the interest and usefulness of the mathematics they were learning it was clear that most did not distinguish between the two: interesting and useful went hand in hand. Whilst some expressed definite interest in learning about metric measurement, the most overwhelming response was in regard to money, and in particular, change: "I can count the football records and give the change back to people correctly and quickly"; "When you go to the fish and chip shop or things like that you've got to count the money, so it's useful"; "It helps with my pizza delivery job - giving change".

Whilst it is gratifying to hear expressions of the confidence students are gaining from their maths classes, the pizza comment, coming from a level 3/4 CGEA student, was perplexing. It was obvious from the task that they were engaged in at the time, calculating circumferences and diameter ratios of circular objects ranging from watch faces to car tyres and steering wheels, that the teacher was aiming at a more sophisticated level of mathematics than 'giving change'. How was it then that this was the paramount achievement mentioned by so many students?

These reflections caused me to return to the material of my classroom research and the students I had come to observe at close quarters for a semester.

The Self in Maths

In listening to the students in the CGEA classroom I have become more and more aware of the importance played by their own unique views of themselves and their lives. I think that somehow these motivations, and past life experiences, can provide valuable clues for teaching. They tell us how the students see themselves, what they see as their role in life. I am suggesting that this positioning of self, coupled with a picture in their heads of what mathematics actually is, has a greater effect on what they take away from maths and numeracy classes than teachers might realise. These factors can cut across any visions that we, as teacher, might have of what is important in mathematics.

Many women, expressed a desire to 'improve' themselves. Faye: "I didn't complete year 9 and ... I wanted to prove to myself that I wasn't stupid." Dawn: "re-educating myself, because I only did year eight ... self esteem ... I wasn't happy with myself at home, there's more to life than just washing nappies". Sarah: "because I don't want to be basically a statistic for the department of social security".

Sometimes becoming 'better' was not for themselves but for the approval or benefit of their children: their self esteem was tied up in some way with their children's view of them. Dawn, a single mother of 5 children, made this clear: "... for

my children….. before I started back at school my teenage son called me a dole bludger. He saw me just as a mother at home, bludging. But as soon as I started at school their whole outlook changed. That I'm doing something for myself instead of just sitting at home." And Sarah, a young single parent, said: "I want to show her (her child) that you can do something … I don't want her to think this is all there is". And: "… because I just want to help my son's homework that's all", echoes the motivation of many parents returning to study.

The practical things

Many of these mature aged women identified so strongly with their roles as wife and mother that it seemed that the mathematics needed to connect in some way with this role before they could 'hear' it or 'attend' to it. Faye said she liked the class because the teacher related the maths to practical things. Because the home front was her world and the place in which she felt confident, it was her point of entry into maths. This meant that she was often able to contribute facts such as "there are 250 mls in a cup", or "you know when they deliver a cubic metre of soil it ends up all over the front lawn", to the mathematical discussions. It also made her attentive to games related to learning tables or understanding decimals because she could use them with her children. However, it also had a limiting effect on how she viewed other components of the subject, since developing any skills, even writing, which did not relate to her current life, failed to engage her. Even though she wanted to go on with study, it was as if it was not possible for her to envisage the usefulness or interest of anything that did not relate to the present reality.

Many of these mature aged women identified so strongly with their roles as wife and mother that it seemed mathematics needed to connect in some way with this role

As a single parent Dawn had also spent many years of her life in the home with her children. Even though taking the course was in order to change that domestic role, looking towards a career in computer design, she still seemed to identify most strongly with the home and family. That was currently her life. It was what shaped and gave meaning to it. It was what motivated her to 'attend' to some things and not others. Mathematics which did not make sense in that setting was easily rejected as meaningless, especially if she found it difficult. She could appreciate learning about calculating percentages because she could work out her "child endowment stuff" but rejected algebraic ideas for which she could see little purpose. Interestingly, one volume calculation problem, concerning a sandpit, actually 'connected' for her where none of the other contexts did "Oh, now I can work out how much sand I'd need to make the kids' old blue wading pool into a sandpit".

Attitudes such as these might indicate that it is advisable to set everything in a domestic context. However, another complication arises. Even using domestic settings to contextualise the maths in the 'real world' is likely to be unsuccessful if the application does not correspond realistically to the way the students might approach the task in that setting. Referring to a ratio problem contextualised by an exercise to do with the mixing of condensed milk and water, Dawn dismissed its reality base: "I never look at those instructions, I just guess."

Also within that domestic world there are preconceived roles and fixed perceptions to contend with. Faye expressed her lack of connection to some contexts used by her teacher: "…cause I'd just ring a fencing contractor, I mean that sort of thing .. working out areas and how much materials … I don't think I'd ever use it". Similarly, Claire said she didn't see the use of it "because I don't measure anything in the home … I think that if you know you are not going to use it you don't grasp it!" Identifying still with her most recent role in secretarial work, she made it clear what contexts she would relate to: "if there was a method in maths that would relate to office work in some form … That you would use in everyday work."

Claire became delighted with abstract algebra problems after a connection with that prior work had been created for her: "I think that's how I picked up algebra easier. I told her how I used Excel and stuff like that and she said, ' Well think of how you pick up your columns and your rows … that's what algebra is like'. And when I went home I thought, that makes sense! I do it! I used it everyday. So to me that would be something that you would use in the workforce."

She remained convinced that she would never use perimeter, area and volume concepts in the contexts of gardening or home decorating "I'm not going to lay carpet and I'm not going to lay tiles." When I questioned this attitude she became quite adamant: "No! I wouldn't! I'd just get my brothers to do it! I've done my garden but I estimated what I needed , as in plants and bark and that underlay stuff. I measured .. but it was sort of like an estimation. I think I would need this and that and I've got a little bit extra, and it's not bad having extra rather than less."

Differing Perceptions of Mathematics

The conclusion that one might reach from listening to these students is that there is a universal truth: students will only 'connect' to the maths, or take it as their own, if they can relate it to their own use. They are all fixed in the need to see mathematics as a practical tool. However, there are other students who do not expect mathematics to be about the real world and are quite happy about that. Sarah said that she found the fence calculations interesting but she also liked things like Pythagoras: "not that I will ever probably use them for anything. I just like it. I'm not like those kids at school who were always saying stuff like 'when are we ever going to use this?' I like learning about it."

These appear to be students whose past experience of maths includes some successes. They are happy to play the maths 'game'. In fact, past experience makes them quite skeptical about the attempts to connect it.

The differing approaches of two students to one ratio problem illustrates a marked difference in the perspectives they brought to mathematics learning in general. The graphical mixing instructions from a milk powder can depicted three cups of water and one cup of milk. The questions asked: "If you wanted two cups of milk in a recipe, how much milk powder would you use?"

One of the students, Faye, related one of the problems back into the social discourse of the kitchen (Lee:1994). She considered her actual practical experiences and decided that the powder would dissolve into the milk without making an appreciable difference in the volume of the liquid. She spent quite a bit of time arguing this point of view, trying to convince other students at her table. However Sarah, though able to see another point of view when it was pointed out to her, 'knew' that this was not real life but a mathematics problem. She read it through the eyes of someone well versed in the usual discourse of the maths classroom. After consideration she replied: "they haven't told us anything different ... I'll assume it's four cups." The ubiquitous 'they', the text book writers, were seen from within the past school culture where a simplified view of real life was always chosen and any doubts about the actual reality were swept aside.

> **There is an ever increasing body of research warning that contextualising mathematics can cause more difficulties for students that it solves**

Another student, with a successful prior maths education in Lebanon, expressed his annoyance at extraneous words cluttering up what he seemed to think of as real mathematics: "We are talking about mathematics here. We are not talking about English. ... too much talking, too much word would confuse people ... mathematics throughout the world is the same. That mean we can write it in shorthand, but less words - you don't have to write this .. just put question mark."

His view of mathematics was formula based. Mathematics was a set of rules to use with numbers. Relationships to real situations had little to do with the subject. So cluttering it up with contextual descriptions was not right.

Problems with contextualising

There is an even increasing body of research warning that contextualising mathematics can cause more difficulties for students than it solves. Sometimes because the complexity of language required to describe the situation complicates the problem, as for the student above. Sometimes the unfamiliarity of the situation described, adds unnecessary layers of difficulty (Helme,1994). Sometimes the two are inextricably linked, with understanding of the question heavily dependent on the contextual clues which indicate the words to concentrate on. For example, a woman in the class, retrenched after thirty years of working in the clothing industry, tackling a task involving calculations related to fencing a public space: "Um .. what do they mean by three strands? ... [reads] 'there are to be three strands of 3.5 mm thick galvanised wire', I don't understand the three strands." Although friends explained the classic three wire fence to her she remained confused by the wording. 'But it says "thick". It is worth contemplating whether the struggle with these particular contextual complications was adding to this student's meaningful connections with mathematics.

Another problem expressed by researchers in this field is the way in which the situations described can sometimes take students into unwelcome emotional states. For instance Evans and Tsatsaroni (1994) described an able maths student unable to perform calculations related to restaurant menus. It seemed that she lapsed into the anxiety provoked by past experiences eating out.

In the light of the previous discussion I am proposing an addition to this list of problematics: that we risk students rejecting whole collections of mathematical skills and knowledge when the contexts in which they are presented are just plain irrelevant to them.

However, the thought of abandoning the ideas of relating mathematics to real contexts and returning to abstract and arid symbols on paper remains unthinkable to most adult maths and numeracy teachers. It would be a repeat of past mistakes, and since the very idea underpinning our curriculum documents is that of "numeracy making meaning of mathematics" (Johnston and Tout:1995), this reversion to traditional practices is clearly not the answer.

Alternative suggestions of negotiating curriculum with numeracy in embedded contexts related to majority students' interests run the risk of totally excluding some students. Alison Lee described a classroom where one young woman was subjected to an entire maths course based around topics like cars and football because the majority of class members were young males. The young woman said nothing for the entire class. What connections was she likely to make under these circumstances?

Students' perceptions of maths seem to be very much influenced by where they stopped their mathematics education in the past. Whether they see mathematics as abstract study or pragmatically useful in the home, whether they see it as abstractions, formulae or problem solving, or whether they still have a vision of it as merely related to arithmetical operations, will colour their thinking and responsiveness. And unfortunately, all of these perceptions are usually combined in the one classroom.

A summing up

I am suggesting that for many, 'confidence' comes from making connections with their current reality. A reality which shapes their perception of what is important, interesting or useful in their lives. Whatever views we, the teachers, might have of critical numeracy or the beauty of mathematics, it is the students' views that will determine what they will 'attend' to in the subject. Kuhn's words: "we see through the eyes of past experience" seem to be particularly apt when applied to students in adult numeracy and mathematics classes.

I think that one vital component of a meaningful maths experience is being able to 'connect it'. For some this would mean to see the mathematical ideas in it, the general principles embodied in the task. For others it is seeing the practical uses of the mathematics on a personal level that will trigger their attention. If the obvious contextual settings fail to make concepts meaningful for these students, then other applications need to be discovered. Many teachers will say that this is too hard, since the students are all interested in different things, and they do not have time. However I am proposing that it is almost as important as teaching the skills at all, and may be the very step which prevents the whole endeavor from becoming a total waste of time.

Whilst many women in the class rejected the concepts of area and volume presented within the preoccupations of the handiperson, they were receptive to them in relation to packaging and household products: the reasons for the choice of differing shapes and size, and the relationships between cost of packaging materials (surface area) and quantity of product inside (volume). In fact the whole class, male and female included, found it easy to relate to items from the supermarket shelves in a variety of ways.

For teachers the challenge is two-fold. In the light of this discussion it seems vital to make decisions about what we think are the most important mathematical ideas at any level, and to concentrate teaching efforts on ensuring we create connections for the students. This means revisiting the ideas, coming at them from a variety of potentially meaningful angles and probably articulating to the students our ideas of what we think is important and how it relates to the major ideas within the field.

A variety of contextual applications of particular concepts for students to choose from would be of benefit. If a concept is developed within one particular setting then it seems to be important to discuss the transfer of the idea to other contexts. Using the review time after a class exercise or activity, not to go over all the calculations involved, but to draw the links to other applications of the same idea or to make the links between what has been covered in past classes might also be an important strategy to investigate. Inviting students to contribute their past experience or likely future uses of the mathematical principles might well assist other students to make personal connections. If we can tap into the deeply personal associations underlying the learning process and increase the web of connections, we might then be able to move beyond the obvious 'basics' and expand the students' perceptions of the power of mathematics.

Beth Marr has worked for 16 years in TAFE with maths and numeracy students and during that time she has produced several numeracy resources such as: Mathematics: a new beginning; Strength in numbers; and Breaking the maths barrier. Beth has also worked with adult maths and literacy teachers in a professional development capacity and she now lectures in the Department of Industry, Professional and Adult Education at RMIT University, Bundoora.

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Picking up the threads: learner experiences of necessary knowledge

by Veronica Volkoff and Barry Golding

In this article, Veronica Volkoff and Barry Golding present a discussion of what they found out about learners' expectations and experiences of ALBE classes around Australia.

> "I want to find a job and I want to know how to read so I can help them (my kids). Since coming here, I've been able to read books to my kids for the first time and I'm forty years old. It hurts when you go into a place and want a job and they ask you to write, and if you can't, they just say 'thanks a lot'. You can go for thirty or forty jobs and as soon as they know you can't read or write they don't want to know you. I feel angry then and feel like blowing them away or shooting myself. I hope to have a full-time job, earning an honest dollar, supporting my kids."
> *Forty year old man studying literacy with an ACE provider.*

No learner starts with a clean slate: all adult learners are in some sense returning to study. The questions we address here, based on our Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) funded research interviews with learners in vocational education and training (VET), are why they return to study, what they want to learn, how they perceive it will help and in what sense it is seen as necessary. Being longitudinal, our research also throws some light on the congruence (or otherwise) between original intentions and self reported outcomes, and the extent to which perceptions of what learning is necessary and valuable change during and following training.

Our research, based on longitudinal interviews with over 230 people in a wide range of VET and Adult and Community Education (ACE) contexts in five States and Territories in Australia, provides a unique insight into why people return to study. In this brief article we have presented some scenarios and illustrated them with some self-reported experiences of learners who participated in our research. We have primarily focussed here on what they considered was necessary learning, illustrated by their reports of positive outcomes. However, we could have led to similar conclusions by using illustrations drawn from negative learner experiences which resulted in disappointment, disillusionment and depression when learning environments failed to address their particular needs.

> **'As the bar continues to be raised in the workplace, lifelong learning for many people is a necessity rather than a luxury'**

Raising the literacy bar for work

Our first observation is that whether people are working or not, the penalties for low literacy and other basic skills, in their various forms, are very high in social and economic terms. As the bar continues to be raised in the workplace, lifelong learning for many people is a necessity rather than a luxury. The impact of workplace restructuring, globalisation and the casualisation of work has cut a swathe through many industries, regions and peoples lives.

Almost every job now requires some forms of literacy and numeracy, if only for the storeperson to read what is on the boxes, to get a fork-lift drivers ticket or to obtain a drivers licence to get to work each morning.

Many interviewees spoke to us about their reasons for needing to improve ther basic skills. A thirty one year old fisherman who had worked on boats since leaving school at fourteen reported that he had previously been able to obtain all the necessary certificates for his work, despite his low levels of literacy and numeracy. These certificates included ones in charting, advanced first aid, firefighting, and shipboard safety. The courses had all been based on practical skills and had been flexible enough to allow him to successfully complete oral competency tests. However, as he trained to gain his unrestricted master class licence to operate independently, "the rules changed" and he was advised that completion of all the practical parts with oral testing on more theoretical aspects was no longer sufficient. In effect, he had to "go away to learn to spell and then come back to do the test." Feeling suddenly excluded from his lifelong career, he embarked on a literacy course, "I'd like to be able to get a piece of paper and put it up to people and not be ignored".

It is little easier for people unemployed, or casually or tenuously employed, with low literacy. Indeed, literacy is now essential to complete a job application.

A thirty four year old woman living in a rural area explained that she left school in Year 10 and then worked in a succession of retail jobs and in the meat industry. As the literacy demands of available jobs increased and her unemployment became protracted, she enrolled in a literacy course at TAFE at the direction of her CES case manager.

> "I didn't do very good at school in literacy and to get a job it was quite hard because it took me hours to fill in the application form. I might have been the first to get the application form but might be the last one to finish filling it out and everyone would already have gone. It's a real disability not to be able to fill in an application form."

Twelve months later she reported that she had persevered with her training and finally was able to gain a job as a supermarket shelf stacker. However, she wryly noted that though "the (supermarket) application form was five pages ... (it) doesn't match with the skills you need to do the job." The levels of literacy and numeracy required to complete the form far outweighed the requirements of the job.

Those not seeking work

It is not only those who find themselves unexpectedly sidelined from the world of work and disadvantaged financially by displacement from a low-skilled job who are excluded. It is also difficult for those not in the workforce, those confronting a change in family circumstances, or in a changing role with kids at school or grown up.

A thirty-three year old mother enrolled in a TAFE literacy course explained, "I have three little kids, 15, 8 and 6, and they need me to read and write to be able to help them with their homework". She was one of many women and men who reported that their motivation to study stemmed from a desire to be able to help their children and model a more positive attitude to learning than the one they had encountered.

Indeed, people we interviewed were primarily and very purposefully studying to 'break the cycle' of low levels of education and training and chronic unemployment in the family. In some cases it was to help their kids with schoolwork. In others it was to model that learning or study. Sometime it had nothing whatever to do with employment in a paid sense, though it clearly had vocational spin-offs. Many people saw themselves as beyond working age and "far too old to get a job", even in their thirties. In many cases people were simply trying to improve their self-esteem or make "something out of my life". In many instances the key motivating force was the company of other learners: to feel part of a supportive group or community is also critical for many people. A thirty five year old woman described her many reasons for participating in study for the first time since school, "Firstly to learn to spell properly, because I grew up dyslexic and to improve my self esteem, to mix with people better and to make some good friends because I'm a single mum."

Different reasons for going back to education

Among both employed and unemployed groups are people whose first language is not English, who may or may not be fully literate in their own first language. A fifty five year old NESB man, living in a rural area, told us about finding himself out of work, due to the recession and a new management team. He reported that he had been able to "get through with my low level of literacy" for thirty seven years as a pastrycook. He added that he could read and write in his first language but that he "didn't go to school much and would like to do this now ... I just want to do it, to be able to pick up the paper and read it, and write all about it. Anything you can do, it's pretty exciting if you can do it the right way!".

> **'Peoples perceptions of the skills they wanted to learn often changed over time within the course'**

Some people recognise that they simply have to come to grips with a new technology. Invariably, this involves computers. Many people are without computer literacy, often educated before the advent of computers, but with employment, family or community commitments which make computer multi-literacies (writing, editing, emailing, accessing multi-media, surfing the net) useful and often essential. A forty year old man reported, "I'd like to get my literacy up and would like to get more computer skills and now that they've put the net up, I get really jealous because I want to surf on that."

In addition there are those who have come back to study simply because they have to satisfy authorities: such as those responsible for administering eligibility for social security and unemployment benefits.

A large proportion of learners are concurrently working, and feel a need to update their qualifications, knowledge, skills and attitudes to stay abreast of changes at work. Most are not required to study by their employer, but do so voluntarily to keep their vocational options open.

People's perceptions of the skills they wanted to learn often changed over time within the course. Initially, many reported fear and apprehension and a very low expectation of their own ability to learn successfully, derived largely from unsatisfactory earlier learning experiences. Some with recent work experience considered themselves relatively knowledgeable about current work practices, lacking only the formal literacy and numeracy skills. Others, particularly women who had very limited work experience or a long period at home with children expressed their need to acclimatise themselves to learning, social interaction and workplace changes.

Different learning environments

We have observed distinct differences in learning environments between those that are primarily 'provider' focussed and those that are primarily 'learner' focussed. In the former, the delivery focus is on the course, its content and documented learning outcomes to be addressed within a certain time frame. In the latter, the focus is on negotiated learning outcomes involving acquisition of confidence and skills within course completion schedules determined by learners proceeding 'at their own pace'.

One teacher, reflecting on her own practice in two providers, one TAFE and one Adult Community Education (ACE) Centre, expressed, almost with surprise, that although the course she taught was the same, her teaching methods were distinctly different in the two settings. Her emerging explanation was that in the ACE setting, the learners had ownership of the learning environment: it was their community after all, and the teacher was naturally drawn to adapt to the needs of the group as a whole and to address individual goals and difficulties. In this environment, the learners reported that they used the learning centre for many purposes, for health, child care, financial assistance as well as learning needs. Drawn from this experience it is no wonder that learners felt comfortable to ask the teacher to address their particular needs, which in turn could be incorporated into the class activities for the day.

> **Many learners have spoken about the importance of particular support structures in their learning enviroment**

Many learners have spoken to us about the importance of particular support structures in their learning environments. Some of these learners belong to more than one equity target group seen to be disadvantaged. In particular, of the 148 learners in our study who self reported that they had low basic skills, 61 per cent were members of four or more such groups. Indeed, people with low basic skills made up 94 per cent of the 49 people who belonged to five or more equity target groups. Our research clearly shows that the more compounded the disadvantage, the more threads there are to pick up.

A forty seven year old, rural, Aboriginal man for whom English is a second language, long term unemployed and living in a rural area recalled leaving school at the age of 12 in 1961 when "just spelling and count up to a hundred was all you needed". From that time, he had no formal training of any kind but worked on cattle stations labouring around town and for the railways. "When came to apply for a job, they ask you to fill in a form and I couldn't do it. When they asked me what grade I finished in school, I couldn't tell them." He described his experience of returning to study.

> "When I first started here, I thought, 'what the hell am I doing here, I'm so old?' but I saw some old guys and an old grandmother here … for the first two weeks was a bit scary … it was important to have an Aboriginal teacher and if she wasn't there, I might have stopped coming. She understood and she encouraged me to keep coming and doing it … might do another course … might even go back to work. I been here three years to get a certificate and when I got it I felt proud. I just want to be able to go there and fill out my application on a piece of paper and apply for that job and if anyone asks me to be able to tell them."

Clearly, his perceptions of his own capacity, of learning and of potential outcomes changed dramatically over the course of his study. We have encountered many similar learners whose perceptions of what skills and qualifications may be helpful to them in their personal and working lives and their own capacities changed significantly over the course of their participation.

A thirty four year old Papua New Guinean woman, resident in a rural area told us of her Australian husband's encouragement to enrol in a TAFE literacy course to "get to know people and speak English with them". Having dropped out of primary school in Grade Three to work in clothing factories, she had to overcome strong feelings of apprehension, "The first day here I felt a little bit scared and embarrassed". She persevered with the TAFE course despite having to take two buses each way and to travel for two hours. She also learnt from her eight year old daughter, "If I read something and can't pronounce it, she says 'this is how you pronounce it, this is how you break it up, like this!'"

Twelve months later, she reported that things were easier for her. There were other useful and unanticipated outcomes for her and her family.

> "When I received your letter (about the research interview) I read it by myself and I understand what you are saying to me … I think I learnt more about Australian culture. Everytime I learnt a bit of language I also learnt something about the culture as well … My eight year old daughter still helps me with some words but sometimes I can also help her with her schoolwork now … I am studying to get a learner's permit (for driving) … Before I wouldn't go to the bank and last year I couldn't go and do the shopping by myself and now I can go and do the banking by myself and know how much things cost … Before I couldn't answer the phone, but now I can talk to them and take a message and write it down and get a phone number down quickly … I was thinking of doing a course in hospitality, so maybe after I get the driver's licence I can come to TAFE by myself and study and also work."

Multiple outcomes

Outcome studies which report only vocational outcomes are clearly only one dimensional. A thirty two year old man who left school at twelve resisted encouragement and direction to commence a literacy course while unemployed for three and a half years. Finally he succumbed to pressure and enrolled in a course at an ACE provider. Twelve months later he was still not sure of his progress and ambivalent about attending. However, another twelve months later he reflected,

> "The CES wanted me to do this course for years but I was scared and reluctant because I hadn't needed the skills and hadn't liked it at school and didn't think I'd be able to learn much anyway. I'm glad I done it now. I should've listened to the CES and done it long ago but I just wanted to get a job first. I worked since I was twelve years old as a press operator in die casting and hadn't been out of a job. Now I'd be happy to stay here for another five years."

> **'In the end, the outcomes as experienced by learners often exceed their intentions and expectations'**

He proudly admitted that he had primarily gained confidence:

> "I can read a book to me nieces. Before when they asked me I had to say I'm busy. It feels good to be able to sit down and read one to them … I feel proud of what I have achieved and so wouldn't mind if everyone knew what I have been studying and the progress I have made … It's about overcoming the fear of coming to a class like this … I'm on the Board of Management here at (the ACE provider) … will be making a speech at the annual general meeting about the course we offer here, so that will be a task in itself to stand up in front of all those people … I'm still doing the same course and a couple of other courses, reading and writing … computer course … maths course."

Again, the outcomes extended well beyond any of the earlier perceptions and intentions and beyond purely individual gains. His ability to contribute to his extended family and to the community has been greatly enhanced. Together with his confidence and pride, he has developed a trust of the ACE centre staff. He was still looking for work and suggested that it would be a good idea for

> "this place, a teacher to come with us to the employer , if we could get a job interview to explain what we have been doing, coming to learn to read and write and to tell them the progress that I have made. It might give the employer an incentive to employ someone like me and not just reject them out of hand."

Finally, learners have emphasised the importance of the learning context: an understanding teacher; a welcoming environment; a supportive group within which mutual trust is built and a flexible program open to addressing personal needs and goals in the development of confidence, self esteem, study skills, the ability to transfer learning to practical situations and an enduring interest in lifelong learning.

In the end, the outcomes as experienced by learners often exceed their intentions and expectations. What is basic and necessary in adult literacy and basic education is the freedom to allow these outcomes to grow and emerge in both learners and in the learning context.

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Barry Golding is a full-time VET researcher based at Bendigo Regional Institute of TAFE (BRIT) but is also seconded as research fellow to the Centre for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE) at the University of Melbourne.

The authors are completing two major national research projects in 1998 through CSHE: an NREC study of VET provision in ACE through RMIT and BRIT, and a longitudinal study of experiences of VET participants in a range of target groups for ANTA.

VALBEC aims to lead the adult literacy field through identifying issues of importance to practitioners and facilitating positive change. This is achieved through networking, professional support, the sharing of information and the promotion of best practice.

V A L B E C

Integrating numeracy with agriculture

an interview with Chris Tully

In this interview, Chris Tully discusses some of the 'basic' numeracy demands on farmers and how these demands are changing.

Fine print: What are the levels of numeracy knowledge among farmers?

Chris: As with the community generally, the level of knowledge varies significantly. Some farmers are about level 1 of the CGEA, others are at a very high level. Some farmers have degrees and Masters in agriculture, so there is huge diversity. From speaking to people I found that a lot are down the lower end, some are at the top, a few are in the middle. John Fenwick of Melbourne University did a survey which shows that the literacy and numeracy levels of farmers are significantly low.

Fine print: How did you research the needs of this group of learners?

Chris: A lot of direction came from the people on the project steering committee. It was made up of farmers, including Ken Shone from Colac who has been very vocal about the literacy needs of farmers, Claire Claydon the Education Officer of the Victorian Farmers Federation, and representatives from the Victorian Primary Industries Training Board. I also made some visits to farms, for example an apple grower in Warburton, to talk to them about their numeracy needs. I made a lot of contacts with trainers in the country, to find out what sort of things they were doing with their students. And I spoke to a range of others, such as financial advisors, Government departments, union reps, and business people.

Fine print: What were the key numerical concepts that had to be addressed?

Chris: The numeracy of farming is complicated. We identified four major areas: production, employment, business management, and occupational health and safety. Some measurements and calculations are very specific to farmers. For example, how to calculate correct seeding rates, or how much fertiliser to apply to a given area. Some farmers have particular ways of measuring, for example when dairy farmers want to measure the amount of dry matter in a paddock, they put down their gumboot to measure the length of the grass against a mark on the gumboot, then they calculate how much time that grass will last a certain number of cows. A more technical way of doing it is to use a pasture indicator, which measures the density as well as the length. For quick estimates farmers use the gumboot, but on a regular basis check with a pasture indicator. Dry matter calculations are very important because they affect decisions about movements of stock and use of fertiliser.

Another important concept is conversion from imperial to metric and vice versa. Lots of farmers still talk in acres and feet, and all the farm equipment that comes from the States is imperial, but everything else is metric, so they have to make conversions like that all the time.

> **'They have seen a lot of changes to their practices over the last decade'**

Farmers these days need a lot of general business knowledge about profit and loss, and how to plan to maximise output. Cost benefit analysis is an important concept. For example the apple grower had to work out if it was cost effective to buy expensive netting to protect his trees from storms. Another problem he had was deciding what type of apples to grow. His biggest clients are the supermarkets, and they just want big apples like Pink Lady apples, so some of the smaller ones like Croftons he doesn't grow any more. I actually prefer the Croftons, but they're small, so people won't buy them.

Employment issues are important because some farmers employ seasonal labour, and they have to work out how many employees they need, how much to pay them and how much tax to deduct.

Fine Print: Did you link the materials to a curriculum?

Chris: The materials are loosely based on the CGEA. We wrote the materials consciously bearing in mind the levels of the CGEA. Not all the CGEA competencies are covered, but if you work through all the materials, a lot of them link to CGEA competencies. But we were basically governed by what the farmers needed.

Fine Print: What problems did you encounter with the project?

Chris: One big problem was finding accurate information. There was some disagreement about what was really needed. Often sources contradicted each other. For example, the use of Pythagoras theorem can be useful to calculate the area when there is a triangle with a square corner. Some people only use the basic 3-4-5 triangle for calculations and said that was enough, but others said that they need the whole theorem. Another problem was providing

accurate figures for the case studies, especially for figures such as the yield from a paddock. How many tonnes yield you get depends on a lot of factors, like whether it is a dry or a wet year.

Another problem is that what they need to know keeps changing. They have seen a lot of changes to their practices over the last decade or so. Quality has become an issue so they need to keep accurate records and this has required an increase in numeracy skills. New legislation also places new demands on them. For example, if they are using chemicals they need to get a chemical operator's licence and this requires a knowledge of ratio for the accurate mixing of ingredients.

Chris Tully is a teacher of numeracy at Kangan Batman Institute of TAFE. During 1997 and 1998 she worked on a project funded by the Victorian Primary Industries Training Board and supported by the Victorian Farmers Federation to develop numeracy and literacy materials for farmers, agricultural workers and other rural learners. Fine Print interviewed Chris about the challenges of integrating agricultural content and numeracy materials.

Teachers of adult and workplace literacy

Are you interested in gaining formal qualifications in adult literacy teaching?

The Faculty of Education at Deakin University offers the following postgraduate courses which are offered nationally in the flexible delivery mode.

Graduate Certificate of Education (Adult Literacy)

The course is suitable for teachers in the areas of basic and further education in the TAFE and ACFE sectors. Core units are 'Language, Literacy and Learning', 'Out-of-School Literacies', 'Literacy and the Adult Learner', 'ESL and the Adult Learner'.

Graduate Certificate of Professional Education and Training (Adult Education and Literacy)

This course is suitable for teachers and trainers in work place education and training. Core units are 'Adults Learning in the Workplace' and 'Language and Literacies: Contexts and Challenges in the Workplace'. Students are also required to complete two electives.

Graduate Certificates are intended for students who will normally either be three year trained teachers seeking to enter the field of adult literacy, or graduates working in the adult literacy field without specialist qualifications. The courses comprise four units which are normally taken over a one year part-time period. There are no attendance requirements, and teaching support is offered in the form of weekend study days, teleconference tutorials and 'First Class' conferencing.

Master of Professional Education and Training (Adult Education and Literacy)

This coursework Masters is intended for literacy or related adult educators and trainers who have completed four years of tertiary study. It aims to produce graduates equipped to pursue a career in adult education and training who are informed and critical about research and policy development in their field.

Students are required to complete eight credit points of study. The course is normally taken over a minimum of two years part-time, off-campus study. It may include a research component or be taken by coursework only.

The following specialist units in adult education and literacy are available: 'Adults Learning in the Workplace', 'Language and Literacies: Contexts and Challenges in the Workplace', 'Adult Literacies', and 'Issues in Literacy Education'.

For further information contact the Research and Graduate Studies Office on telephone Geelong (03) 5227 1486 or Burwood (03) 9244 3723 or e-mail [illegible]@deakin.edu.au

Academic enquiries about these courses may be directed to Mr Rod Maclean, on telephone (03) 5227 1472 or e-mail rmaclean@deakin.edu.au

DEAKIN

Open Forum

In this Open Forum we present three very different contributions which all touch on the various aspects of our work. Lyn Matheson provides a report on a recent ALRNNV seminar, Nick Gadd reviews *The Illusion of Postmodernism*, and Lesley Crommelin reports on a thoroughly educational bus tour!

Who do you need to be when you teach writing?

At the last dinner party you attended (who has time to actually give dinner parties any more?) when a new acquaintance asked you, "What paid work do you do?" (in contrast to all the unpaid work!... Do you have a few spare hours?) did you describe yourself as an Adult Literacy Tutor? Facilitator? Educator? Trainer? Teacher? or something else entirely? (Try.... Martyr? Saint? Drone?)

Implicit in how we describe ourselves in the Adult Literacy field is our positioning in relation to pedagogy and curriculum. Each description carries with it a whole range of assumptions about identity and personal stance. When we approach the teaching of writing, a whole host of other issues are raised. Consider how we respond to the different writer identities in our classes and how much intervention we are prepared to make to meet the demands of writing genres and competency outcomes in the courses we teach. (Will I ever get the CGEA assessment criteria to fit?)

At the recent ALRNNV Seminar, "Writing : Curriculum, Pedagogy and Teachers' Construction of Knowledge", these were some of the issues raised by guest speakers Catherine Macrae and Allie Clemens to a fairly sparse, but nonetheless receptive and enthusiastic, audience. Opportunities such as these to engage in thought and discussion with researchers and colleagues seem to be becoming increasingly rare. (Now don't get political here, this is meant to be a reflective piece.)

Catherine Macrae gave an interesting account of her research in adult literacy programs in Scotland in which she has examined the ongoing narratives of tutors about their students' work. In her research she has aimed

> "to show the complexity of text by demonstrating that language choices can be seen as layers of simultaneous and interrelated types of representation ... and ... to conclude by relating these ideas about the complexity of text making to teaching writing in adult literacy." (Are you still with me?)

When we looked at the actual tutors' narratives it became clearer how each had constraints, either internal or external, placed upon her teaching of writing, that impacted on her student's writing. There was reticence evident in one tutor's account of how directive she felt she could be in identifying errors in the student's text. Another tutor felt a conflict of wills when a student chose not to conform to the task set and wrote outside the boundaries of the requested genre. Exercising her authority as a teacher was not a problem for one tutor who gave suggestions and assisted the student in re-drafting her writing to a final and accepted standard for the Communications course she was teaching. A tutor working with a multi-lingual student moved on from using worksheets to a focus on the student's own narrative and was delighted with the student's application of past learning. The student who believed that copying was the only way to learn to write proved a challenge for the last tutor who offered suggestions only to find that the student eventually discovered his own voice and went on to write copiously, but on his own terms. (Are these familiar scenarios?)

These narratives were a fascinating 'window' into the work of the five tutors in Scotland and it was evident that Catherine continues to find more layers of meaning, five years on. She indicated that the thesis is some way off from completion partly due to the interruptions of work and family, a sentiment echoed by several in the room similarly engaged in further study.

The pressures of time and funding issues were again mentioned with the launch of *Knowledge of Texts: Theory and Practice in Critical Literacy*. This publication has been a collaboration of a number of dedicated people kept 'on track' and brought to fruition by the vision and hard work of Bev Campbell and Delia Bradshaw. The fact that people are still working towards such publications and conducting research in the field inspires hope, but at the same time there is a sense of outrage that ALRNVV faces such an uncertain future. (Now you are getting political again....write something about the Workshops.)

"Who do you have to be when you teach writing?" was discussed in the workshop conducted by Catherine Macrae, which I attended, and in the workshop conducted by Liz Suda. Such questions as to what extent do we encourage the authentic voices of our students and how do we assert our authority over knowledge and texts in the classroom were raised. Liz's group examined a collection of writing by her ESL class from which the issues of teacher intervention and transferable skills were discussed. Kath Brewer-Vinga was to have run a workshop on the development of training packages but a lack of numbers

meant that John Wilson and a couple of other people were able to have a general discussion about the vocational training area. Mexie Butler disappeared with a group to play on the Internet. New Learning Technologies provides a focus for recent research funding and gives rise to a whole range of different questions about professional development, writing processes and interactions with electronic text. An afternoon workshop was hardly enough time for such wide-ranging discussions. (But then we all had places to be and it was a Friday afternoon.)

This ALRNVV seminar was excellent, made so by the quality of the organisation, the relevance of the guest speakers and a lunch that was superb. Unfortunately, seminars such as these are all too few. We all need professional development days such as this to offer us insight into the broader issues, encourage us to examine our own practices and stimulate further discussion. The research questions we identified will hopefully be taken up and will perhaps provide the basis for a future seminar. (Always finish on a note of hope.)

I gave a country participant a ride back to the city after and we spoke enthusiastically about our work and the relevance of the day's issues back in our various educational settings, as teachers, tutors, trainers, whatevers. I feel certain that we had all gained from a small dose of self appraisal in the context of research findings and the experiences of others. I feel quite comfortable with the title of Adult Literacy Teacher and I will continue to reflect on my teaching practice, discuss issues with my colleagues and read! (Now, will I start reading "Writing: Curriculum, Pedagogy…or will I get an early night?)

Lynne Matheson is a Sessional ALBE Teacher and Co-ordinator of the Volunteer ALBE Tutor Program at Carlton Adult Reading & Writing Program

Review of *The Illusions of Postmodernism* by Terry Eagleton, Blackwell, UK 1996

People who attended the LERN conference five years ago, which included interpretations of *Strictly Ballroom* and concluded with a rendition of JPY's *Love is in the air*, could feel that we were participating in a postmodern event. The cultural hybridity, the embracing of popular culture, the scepticism about universal claims, the sense of fun – all provided a sense that we had moved on both from reactionary education which stuck people in class-based boxes and simple-minded progressivism which leaned towards the self-esteem industry or fantasies of revolutionary transformation. In the late 1990s, postmodern ideas and texts can be seen everywhere: books deconstructing culture and sexuality are prominently displayed all over bookshops, usually with very shiny sexy covers. Postmodernism is big business all right.

There are at least two broad strands of postmodernism, the popular version and the intellectual version. (There I go, introducing a binarism in the second paragraph). According to the popular conception, postmodernism is a combination of a number of forces, including the communications revolution; a collapse of the distinctions between high and low culture; multiculturalism and hybridity; and sexual politics. Participating in these things doesn't require expert knowledge of the latest utterances from the Sorbonne. If being a postmodernist is simply a matter of watching The Simpsons, using the Internet, eating at Thai restaurants and experimenting with one's sexuality, then many people are postmodernists by default, much as anybody living in sixteenth century Italy could be described as belonging to the Renaissance even if they didn't read Erasmus and Dante.

A more intellectual understanding of postmodernism involves wrestling with the ideas of thinkers like Derrida, Foucault and Rorty. One difficulty with doing so, as Robert Manne has pointed out, is that most people in Anglophone cultures, unlike French or German or Chinese people, are not well trained in philosophy. Philosophy is on the school curriculum in most European countries but you would find few university graduates in Australia or England who could summarise the ideas of Kant or Nietzsche. Most of the leading lights of postmodernism, such as Derrida and Foucault, are involved in a debate with traditional philosophy, so trying to engage with their ideas without knowing the tradition is well-nigh impossible.

Another problem with postmodernism is that while many people sympathise with the idea of making society and education more diverse, including previously marginalised Others, and critiquing the white, male, heterosexual, thin, Anglocentric view of the world, they are more nervous about throwing out all the concepts which have emerged from that tradition, including such notions as Reason, Truth, and Justice. If truth is relative, then no values can be said to be any better than any others, and there seems no reason to prefer one kind of society over another. Hence, Richard Rorty (according to Terry Eagleton) argues "that all social discourse is blinded and indeterminate, that the 'real' is undecideable, that all actions beyond a timorous reformism will proliferate perilously beyond one's control … "

Eagleton is impatient of this kind of thinking. His latest book The Illusions of Postmodernism is a witty and scathing attack on what he sees as the political cowardice and intellectual folly of much of the movement. Eagleton could be described as a lion of the English left, were it not that the left is currently so weak that that would be a rather hollow compliment. He is a Marxist of long standing (one of the few left standing) despite his anachronistic role as a professor at Oxford University. Marxism is frequently cited as one of the "grand narratives" which has been deconstructed by postmodernism, although as Eagleton points out, the idea that all of Western thought consisted of "grand narratives" which

were slain by Jacques Derrida, opening the door to a joyous era of plurality, is rather a grand narrative in itself. In educational circles, this type of thinking sometimes takes the form of dismissing any theory of language or pedagogy which makes claims to coherence, on the grounds that it is objectionably dogmatic.

Eagleton mounts a subtle and passionate defence of Marxism, and in the process he is unabashed about making statements which he announces to be universally true. "The statement 'In all times and places, most men and women have led lives of fairly futile labour, usually for the profit of a few' is one such utterance. 'Women have always suffered oppression' is another." Having made these statements, he then lays his cards on the table to declare what it is that socialists should be seeking: "It would be a good deal worse than dishonest to relinquish the vision of a just society, and so, to acquiesce in the appalling mess which is the contemporary world."

Eagleton's main objection to postmodernism is that it fails to seriously challenge the economic and social structures which oppress the majority of people. It focusses on the 'margins', and takes great interest in sexuality, language and all forms of transgression, while the business of world domination proceeds apace. He argues that postmodernism is "economically complicit" with the present economic order: "Capitalism is the most pluralistic order history has ever known, relentlessly transgressing boundaries and dismantling oppositions, pitching together diverse life forms and continually overflowing the measure." Thus, even conservative politicians can be heard applauding the Gay Mardi Gras for the economic boost it provides to Sydney. In the postmodern world, pretty much anything can be transgressed except the economic order itself.

Eagleton is not entirely negative about postmodernism. "Postmodernist culture has produced ... a rich, bold, exhilarating body of work across the whole span of the arts". He regards its most important achievement as the fact that "Reviled and humiliated groups are beginning to recover something of their history and selfhood." Having said that, he concludes that it is more conservative than radical: "Postmodernism is in the end part of the problem, not part of the solution."

Eagleton has an entertaining style and throws in plenty of asides: "psychoanalysis is the thinking person's pulp fiction, at once strenuously analytical and luridly sensational". The jokes usually make a serious point, as when he attacks the postmodern creed that difference and diversity are always good: "It has always struck me as unduly impoverishing of British social life that we can muster a mere two or three fascist parties." In an Australian context, the arrival of One Nation could be said to have added diversity and plurality to the political scene, and even to have given a voice to interesting marginal groups like gun owners, but it would be hard to argue that this really contributes to the common good, unless, that is, one regards such moral and ethical judgements as purely relative.

Those who are wondering whether projects of social change are still viable, or whether concepts like Justice must now be placed in scare quotes for ever more, will enjoy reading this book. Postmodernists will probably find it exasperating, although they have the consolation of knowing that at least they considerably outnumber the Marxists. Those who identify with neither camp would still benefit from reading Eagleton's lucid critique.

Nick Gadd is a member of the Fine Print Editorial Group

Separation of powers bus tour

To celebrate Constitutional Awareness Week for 1998, on the 25th of August, the Victorian Law Foundation and the Electoral Education Centre funded a day's tour for representatives from a variety of Language and Literacy providers, hosted by Rod Quantock.

The tour aimed to present the concept of the Separation of Powers in an innovative, informative, practical and humorous way and to highlight the information resources available in the three institutions, and the assistance which is readily available in organising programmes to promote civics education in the ALBE.

The day began at the Australian Electoral Education Centre – a highly professional activity centre where the mechanics of elections are clearly explained by trained staff and where learners can actively take part in mock elections.

At the Victorian Supreme Court, we were taken to Court No 1 and to the private library where the workings of each were explained by a delightful Court Networker — from a group of volunteers who must undergo six months of intensive training. The Victorian Chief Justice — resplendent in his immaculate traditional robes — explained the importance of traditional practices and the public accessibility of the court buildings. The history of the place is fascinating.

The spectacular views from the Australian Electoral Commission detracted many of us from fully listening to the Victorian Deputy Electoral Officer who explained the role and functions of the commission especially in terms of being a statutory body i.e. government funded but independent.

The opulence of the Victorian State Parliament is really something to look at again and again. The Education Officer entertained us with some wonderful stories and descriptions and really made the building "live". A 13 minute video is available for loan and is a useful resource when a visit to Parliament House is planned.

The bus then took us to the Town Hall in Swanston Street where we had lunch and collected our 'show bags'.

This was a birds eye view of the three essential components of the Separation of Powers and it is recommended that the intensity of such a tour would be overwhelming for the majority of most language and literacy learners and would therefore defeat the purpose of its intention if taken in one hit as we did.

Instead, a carefully programmed examination of all three institutions exploring the relevant points in depth and examining the connections between them would constitute a powerful unit of work encompassing a variety of learning activities.

The main point of the tour to be emphasised, is the public accessibility and the high standards of educational resourcing available at each institution. There are many innovative and creative ways that this active learning could be used in community educational programmes.

Lesley Crommelin is the Activities Officer at VALBEC

Coming issues *Fine Print* in 1998

In 1998 *Fine Print* focuses on how the Adult Literacy and Basic Education teachers define themselves as a distinct field of education.

To this end, each issue is devoted to one of the four terms by which we identify ourselves in our collective name, ALBE.

The autumn edition considered the place of the 'Adult' in ALBE.

The winter edition looked at the place of the 'Literacy' in ALBE.

This spring edition focusses on the ideas surrounding the 'Basic' in ALBE.

The final edition for the year will examine the meaning of 'Education' in ALBE.

Adult education has been experiencing considerable strains in recent years and the summer edition of Fine Print will look back over the year that's gone and try and identify some of the key issues that are shaping the field.

We will be drawing on the various themes explored in the previous three editions, promoting dialogue between writres and looking at how these questions are creatively tackled across the diverse range of sites and contexts in which ALBE practitioners can be found at work.

See details on the back cover about contributing to *Fine Print*.

Policy Update

With the expansion in funding for the flexible delivery of education programs over the last few years, a number of projects have been undertaken which potentially have great significance for the ALBE field. In this Policy Update, Diane Robbie, Jan Kindler and Debbie Soccio take a look at just two projects which seek to link the CGEA with new learning technologies.

CGEA - flexible learning materials project

Diane Robbie is the responsible Project Officer at Open Training Services and Jan Kindler works at the Victorian office of Language Australia and is the joint coordinator of the Adult Education Resource and Information Service (ARIS) and the coordinator of the Adult Literacy Research Network. Here they provide an outline of their flexible CGEA delivery project and they discuss some of the issues that teachers need to consider with this form of delivery.

Overview

In 1996 the need to develop flexible learning materials to support the flexible delivery of the Certificates in General Education for Adults (CGEA) was identified by a research report conducted for Open Training Services (OTS) by the Curriculum, Research and Development Department at Kangan Batman Institute of TAFE.

In response to the report, OTS funded a project to develop a range of flexible learning materials for use in delivery of the CGEA. The materials were required to support delivery of the course primarily in fleximode (involving a combination of independent/self paced and face to face learning modes). The materials would also be suitable for use in other delivery strategies both off and on campus. They were also required to be suitable for use in connection with delivery of other courses.

The report recommended that any new materials have the following design features:

- Integration of CGEA streams in learning and assessment activities;
- Thematic materials where the integration of skills be emphasised;
- Development of core print-based materials supplemented by audio and video;
- Clearly graded levels of difficulty to enable effective placement and staged progress with activities which may be accessed at more than one level;
- Assessment to determine achievement of learning outcomes at a specific level;
- Development of interesting topical generic materials with the potential to customise in a cost-effective manner.

In 1997 OTS released a tender for the development of the CGEA flexible learning materials. The successful tenderer for the project was a consortium of TAFE Institutes and private providers led by ARIS, Language Australia. The consortium members are: ARIS; Kerang Learning Centre; Language Australia; Linda Wyse and Associates; Protea Textware; Sunraysia Institute of TAFE; and Western Melbourne Institute of TAFE (now Victoria University of Technology)

Components of the project

The project aimed to produce materials covering levels II, III and IV of the Reading and Writing, Oral Communication and Numeracy and Mathematics streams, and level II of the General Curriculum Options. It has five components:

A Resource Package which consists of: eighteen Resource books for learners (six for each of the levels II, III and IV); three Learner's Guides (one for each of the levels II, III and IV); a Tutor's Guide; and a CD Rom.

> The Resource books and CD-ROM are based around the six themes: health and lifestyle; media studies; science and the environment; Australian studies; the workplace; and the law. The materials include both teaching/learning activities and assessment tasks.
>
> The Learner's Guides include information about: the Certificates in General Education for Adults; requirements for achieving the credentials; the resource package and how to use it; and learning by flexible delivery.
>
> The Tutor's Guide includes information on: how to use the package; suggestions and resources for follow or additional activities; and information on which learning outcomes are covered in each theme and activity.

An RPL, Assessment and Placement Manual which includes: information on how to conduct an initial student assessment and placement; guidelines for selecting assessment material; examples of assessment and placement tasks for all modules of the CGEA; and information on how to assist students to obtain Recognition for Prior Learning.

A World Wide Web Site which focusses on: information on the CGEA and this project; on-line publishing of learning materials; information about good practice in flexible delivery of the CGEA; a forum for raising issues about the CGEA, with

particular emphasis on flexible delivery. The web site can be accessed at: http://www.sunsite.anu.edu.au/language australia/cgea/cgea.home.html

A Learner Organiser and Record Book that includes: information about credential requirements; a checklist to record module and learning outcome competence; a course planner; a facility for students to share work in progress; and a facility for students to store completed work.

The Trialing and Evaluation of the materials. The Resource Package, RPL, Assessment and Placement Manual and the Learner Organiser and Record Book are currently under trial at seven different sites, in both rural and urban areas. It is expected that the materials will be available by September 1998. Meanwhile progress can be monitored through the web site.

Materials development Issues

The magnitude of the project has been considerable and, as Jan Kindler, Project Manager at Language Australia, can testify, a number of challenging issues have arisen along the way. Some of the questions raised by the consortium are:

- How can the benefits of the CD-ROM with its ability to 'talk' to learners and provide oral explanations be used?
- How can print based materials be written for learners who have minimal contact with their teacher, particularly those working at a distance and who have poor literacy and learning skills?
- How can learners check their understandings?
- How can the range of learners that might use the materials, their literacy levels, interests, learning styles and cultural backgrounds, etc. be catered for?
- How can learners take part in group work or discuss issues if they are working individually?

The challenging nature of the project has resulted in a steep learning curve for the consortium. To answer the above questions the consortium consulted widely with writers and teachers of the CGEA. It was decided that the CDROM and the Learner Resource Books would stand alone. This would allow learners who could not access a CD-ROM to complete the CGEA using the print-based materials only. However, the CD ROM and learners resource books would support each other. Learners could benefit by using both as each medium has different strengths.

Even though the tutor or teacher is only a phone call away many learners are reluctant to ring the teacher every other day to check understanding and to ask questions. It was decided that learners working at level 2 would need to be able to call on a tutor/mentor when required. This person could be a friend, family member, local education officer or volunteer tutor. It would be the tutor/mentors role to help the learner read the text and to explain or discuss any aspects of the booklet the learner needed assistance with. The tutor/mentor would also be able to alert the learner if they felt the learner needed further assistance from their teacher.

The print-based materials allow learners to check their understanding by doing practice exercises and checking their work against sample answers. Learners are encouraged to check with someone else that they are on the right track. This is particularly important for learners working at level 2 and again the important role of a mentor/tutor for on-going support is emphasised.

In the print based materials there has been an attempt to incorporate group discussion by raising questions for learners to consider and possibly discuss with others, but which do not have to be answered formally to cover the curriculum. There are also suggestions, particularly for oral communication, that learners take part in group discussions, perhaps with other class members face-to-face or via teleconference, or with friends.

By covering a range of different themes - Australian studies, media, law, work, health and lifestyle, and science and the environment – the consortium writers have catered for a range of adult interests. While they couldn't guarantee that all learners would be interested in all themes, they felt there was a good chance that they would be interested in some of the themes covered.

As Jan Kindler says, "The exercise of writing flexible learning materials for students has been challenging, partly because of the practicalities of writing for people who are not sitting in front of us, or another teacher, and partly because it has challenged us and our teaching methodologies. It has forced us to become more flexible and inventive in our interpretation of what we consider to be 'good teaching practice'."

The development of all the print-based materials and an interactive CD-ROM is nearing completion. As the materials have been written, they have been trialed and reviewed in a number of centres throughout Victoria. On completion of the review, evaluation and validation processes the materials will be available from OTS Distributions by September 1998.

The project team found itself in largely unexplored territory when facing up to the important instructional design issues underlying these questions. OTS has commissioned other projects to provide a guide to the application of on-line and multi-media to delivery of education and training. Dr. Brian Elkner of Deakin Australia will report on one of these at the OTS conference Exploring New learning Technologies: the teacher perspective in November 1998.

Moderation and on-line technology

Debbie Soccio is Program Coordinator in Adult Basic Education at Victoria University of Technology and has been teaching in the Adult Literacy and ESL field for seven years. She is currently working on an ANTA funded project to evaluate the on-line assessment and moderation Home Page that was developed through a 1997 ANTA funded project. The website is : http:// www.wmit.vic.edu/au/abe/cgeamod/home.html. In this article, Debbie provides an account of the project so far and points out some of the difficulties of on-line moderation.

Competency Based Assessment and Moderation

The development of a competency based curriculum in language and literacy such as the CGEA and, more recently, the development of the NRS have highlighted the need for teacher moderation to ensure that interpretations of competency standards are consistent across providers and over time.

Moderation has been the defining point for understanding and interpreting the assessment criteria of the learning outcomes within the CGEA. This process has assisted practitioners in perhaps coming to a consensus about the varying degrees of interpretation of assessment criteria and thus, greater fairness for students.

Moderation has provided teachers/assessors both new and inexperienced with the opportunity to examine, compare, reflect upon and share practice in assessment. It has assisted teachers with reviewing the effectiveness of their teaching practice and, if necessary, has assisted in modifying their procedures and techniques to provide more reliable and fair assessment opportunities for their students. Sometimes, of course, there has been disagreement during this process.

When the system of moderation was introduced in 1993, most ALBE teachers in the field were unfamiliar with (and resistant to) the notion or actual experience of participating in such processes. Now, six years later, many teachers are again familiarising themselves with the changing context of moderation. As funding for face-to-face moderation decreases and as employment practice becomes more casualised, practitioners are finding it more difficult to attend sessions which had been financially supported since the inception of the accredited document.

On-line Assessment and Moderation Home Page

As a planning mechanism, to deal with this decline in support for moderation, funding was sought to establish a literacy assessment and moderation home page, supported by a professional development assessment program, based around the requirements of the CGEA and the NRS, and using a model which would also be applicable to other competency based ESL and Literacy curricula.

The on-line CGEA moderation process is concerned with quality management of the CGEA. It aims to supplement existing face-to-face moderation currently operating within and across providers of the Certificates. Organisations often sent one person to moderation to represent a community centre, private provider or larger TAFE institution. With limited time and financial support to travel to a central point to share in a moderation session, many other teachers using the CGEA as the basis of their teaching framework may not have had the opportunity to attend moderation sessions at all.

As the newly reaccredited curricula provided few details on the structure within which moderation should work, ensuring consistency of standards is essential but the lack of guidance on how or when these sessions should take place makes it difficult for some managers to support a program which is, in effect, both expensive and time-consuming. There is then a danger of placing little or no value on the process and thus setting the scene for discouraging teachers from being involved in this quality management process.

The On-line Home Page has been an attempt to develop a model which will take moderation 'to the people', allowing everyone teaching the CGEA (with skills and access to on-line systems) the opportunity to be involved in the moderation process, whilst still maintaining representation at moderation sessions within centralised areas.

Many practitioners have commented on the changed focus of Moderation for Verification to a quality assurance procedure that provides opportunity to participate in professional development sessions with other teachers. The Home Page is also a model which will provide access to professional development at perhaps more frequent times of the year. The ability to load and download samples of material at any point in time should make the process more accessible to teachers rather than limiting the professional development learning phase and moderation process to the end of the months of June and December, which are predominantly busier times of the year.

Furthermore, it provides additional professional development for new practitioners in the CGEA. The Home Page seeks to create discussion about assessment and moderation issues that arise in general forums amongst users of the CGEA. Some issues are: understanding the requirements made of students in demonstrating assessment criteria; the difficulties in interpreting what the assessment criteria actually mean; effective interpretation by the teacher and effective demonstration by the learner of the assessment criteria.

Some of the potential benefits of developing and maintaining an on-line assessment and moderation Home Page

which require further evaluation during future months, include whether or not there is:

- moderation available at any time convenient to assessors;
- cost effective reduction in the need for staff release and travel times;
- assessor control over the assessment process in terms of the time s/he chooses to take to assess and the choice of stages in the assessment process;
- anonymity of assessment practice as encouragement for new assessors to participate more comfortably;
- reliability of assessment - all assessors in the country are taking part in the same moderation session, thereby reducing the possibility of local or regional variation;
- encouragement of interstate moderation for a commonly delivered national reporting system;
- opportunity for practitioners to observe and discuss differences in interpretations of levels and assessment criteria;
- opportunity for practitioners to share successful ways of moderating in other areas.

Disadvantages of an on-line moderation system

Technology's Limitations

The limitations of technology have hindered some of the original concepts included as part of the program, particularly with sound files. To download sound through the Internet, the receiver may have a long wait of up to half an hour for a one-minute speech. This limitation, plus the reality that very few providers have submitted quality oral samples to Oral Communications Moderation sessions, has meant that there are not any recorded tapes demonstrating student performance.

These issues do not begin to explain the problems individuals may have with technology in their own time. People might type in one forward slash too many, or forget to guard against power surges, or to retain enough money to pay the costs of the telephone connection, or to find a time when the lines aren't saturated.

And there will always be incompatibility of systems; how many workplaces have ancient technical equipment entirely unsuited to the super high-tech literacy because the program developers did not anticipate the delivery systems appropriate to their product?

Technical breakdown

Without wanting to trivialise the problems encountered during the Project, there were times when things went annoyingly wrong. When one is dealing with portable technical systems, you must be prepared for the system not to work. Instances where the on-line system does not work because someone has brought along the incorrect cable, or where the workshop participants are more familiar with the Macintosh platform, or when server system crashes on the day of presentation, can assuredly cause disarray in the prepared session!

Professional Development

The amount of time available to participate in professional development to develop the knowledge to use the technical systems of the Internet and the Email for purposes of study, research and now moderation, can be difficult to schedule into one's paid working week.

Similarly, the issue of equity can arise. The project demonstrated excellent potential value to people working in isolated settings, but how confident can government be that the necessary hardware will be available? Speculation about true access via local public libraries or Internet cafes or cheap computers and on-line costs is to date no more than speculation.

Where to from here?

From the outset, the Project Team has emphasised that communication within adult literacy through on-line technology must complement face-to-face contact, not replace it. Perhaps future project work should develop procedures which enable people to monitor whether or not the acceptance of technology-based [moderation] systems somehow flows into devaluing of traditional face-to-face teaching (at least as far as government funding is concerned). At this stage, there is no widely-used paradigm for comparing different ways of organising and monitoring adult literacy work, let alone for investigating the possibilities that administrative systems may unduly influence the teaching-learning practices.

Additionally, other issues which are being considered in the light of a second ANTA funded Project (*Participatory Action Research and evaluation of a model for on-line assessment and moderation in adult literacy*, ANTA Adult Literacy National Projects, 1998) to evaluate the Home Page include the:

- on-going cost to update and maintain the Homepage beyond the life of the project (costs to government, to providers and/or to others);
- technical or financial impediments to the ability of practitioners to up-load and down-load samples regularly;
- degree of work involved and information required to present one sample in an appropriate style on-line.

Given the plethora of approaches and instruments for assessing adult literacy learners, what factors should guide decisions about which system of assessment and moderation to use? Is competency based assessment appropriate for use in adult literacy? And if so, should there be a system of moderation? If "yes", then how do we use an on-line facility to complement a face-to-face moderation program already limited by cost, distance and time factors without compromising the underlying principles of direct contact as part of professional development in a meaningful environment?

Beside the Whiteboard

Lesley Crommelin has been involved in the Language and Literacy field since the 1970s and she is currently the Activities Coordinator for VALBEC. She talks here with Bob Keith about her experiences and about where she thinks the field is going.

What are you doing now and how did you reach this point in your career?

As Activities Coordinator for VALBEC, it's my responsibility to follow the directions of the committee in promoting the activities of the organisation namely to raise the profile of VALBEC and increase the membership, to promote and sell the products of VALBEC and to make sure that the annual conference reflects the current issues in Literacy and attracts all those who see a benefit in attending.

Through my initial training as a primary teacher and through study of Speech and Drama to Associate level, my awareness of and interest in Language and Literacy was kindled and it continued as I watched and our children grow and access education. When I moved ESL in the '70s, this interest was expanded and has I've got broad brush view of the field today and some thoughts for tomorrow as well.

What do you see as the personal challenges in your work?

I'm pleased you used the word "challenges" and not problems because I'm an extremely optimistic person and see enormous advantage in finding solutions. I think the seeds of this attitude were always there - growing up in regional Queensland needed copious amounts of positive attitude. My choice of partner (at a comparatively young age) brought with it a complete reversal to my orthodox and very conventional lifestyle. I had to learn to cope with the enormous upheavals we experienced with monotonous regularity (we have moved house 21 times) and so I've developed a very pragmatic attitude in all facets of both my personal and working lives.

Personally, the main challenge has been associated with this lifestyle as there has never been enough time to form professional relationships, develop a career path or commit to formalised study. Through ESL, I was always able to find something to keep me intellectually stimulated wherever we were living. The up side of this experience has allowed me to time to develop my natural abilities and to build my expertise in other ways to fill the gaps as I see them.

Do you miss the classroom?

I tend to identify the most important task of the time and put all my energies and concentration into that task. Perhaps I have a short attention span or I am just a "bear of very little brain" like Pooh! In terms of your question, I hold many fond memories of my experiences in the classroom but as my interests are now outside it and in the broader scheme of things e.g. policy and procedures, there is no gaping void in my life. In a sense it (and its associated activities) was my training ground and that's not to say that I'm out of touch with what happens there but simply that I've moved on to associated interests.

There's a widely accepted argument that all of us in education should do some teaching to keep in touch with "the coalface". I can see the benefits in the principle of this, but I have difficulty with the concept in reality, because it can spread time and effort too thinly just for the sake of being seen to be involved. If I was to develop some new approach and/or strategy in methodology, which needed authenticating, then naturally I would focus all my attention to that task in the classroom. I feel that the 30 odd years spent in a wide variety of classrooms have provided me with enough experience to now make judgements.

I see the sense in multiskilling teachers and allowing a natural development of talent linked with accountability to satisfy the individual and at the same time add value to the organisation's business.

What I really believe is that teachers are trained in a multitude of skills which when governed by individual interests and talents can be developed into skills packages readily transferable into business and industry and can add value. I see education as a sound training ground which when tempered with enthusiasm and courage can move people into exciting and satisfying careers either within or outside the field of education.

What and / or who have been some of the key influences on your career?

The short answer to that is AMES. Over the years, I've worked with this organisation in three different states and in each one I was fortunate to have caught the ear of management who listened to my suggestions and encouraged me to take on innovative and creative and (often unorthodox) views allowing me to act the maverick and step outside traditional boundaries not for any self satisfaction but for the benefit of the learner first and the field second.

To complement this experience, five years ago, I was offered the opportunity to work with a private provider and it was here that even though I was allowed (again) complete freedom to develop the product for the market as I saw fit, I was entirely accountable for all outcomes both student based and financially. It was impossible to achieve this in an hierarchical structure and Process Management principles were

practiced. The team of teachers worked cohesively in a supportive group where we all had freedom to experiment and use our own methodology to achieve results but were accountable for those results and were accountable to each other. Our survival depended on team support and transparency of actions and comment and most importantly, communication. For all our efforts our department was nominated as Victorian Training Provider in the ANTA Quality Awards last year. Even though the department has been disbanded, those involved will carry those skills into whatever field they choose to enter.

What do you see as the key issues facing the Language and Literacy field?

The first half of this decade was a boom time for "Language and Literacy" provision and many in the field thought it was the norm. Those of us who've been around for a long time and experienced the ups and downs (and those of us who read the fine print) knew that SIP funding was finite and the bubble had to burst. The industry was simply unsustainable in that model.

The main issue facing Language and Literacy is that the industry is hidden within the field of education which often tends to be a world unto itself. Practitioners are aware of its benefits and its problems but there are very few outside who fully understand the its overall ramifications both implicit and explicit.

Professional organisations have a key role to play in overcoming this communication gap, but you've got to be pragmatic to achieve this - collaboration between all players demands a positive and constructive attitude while still maintaining the integrity of each organisation through true representation of its membership.

We should all be looking outwards and experimenting with partnerships within our communities at grass level and through all the levels above. Teachers are a very inventive lot really and flexibility is inbuilt into our very practice so let's capitalise on this skill to the advantage of the learners and the field in general.

What professional development do you think could help the field?

Recognition of the professional training of teachers is a key issue and I find the principles of Process Management particularly useful in setting the structure for a solid and productive working relationship within all fields of education. (Process Management operates under the theory and practice where management is there to support the real practitioners i.e. "the workers" and all participants are accountable for the required outcomes.)

Once the lines of open and constructive communications are established relevant and productive PD occurs naturally and is responsive to the needs of the current client group while still keeping the broad picture of business development in mind.

What sort of role do you think VALBEC could play?

This association (as all professional bodies do) has a range of functions and it is important to identify these to understand the role and influence that peak organisations will have in the next few years. To do this requires committee members who can read the 'big picture' and liaise with policy makers to offer advice which will advance the field of Language and Literacy while at the same time reflecting the issues which the membership sees as important.

In fact, VALBEC and ACAL act as both clearing houses and focal points for new initiatives and changes in direction.

But at the end of the day, VALBEC will only be as strong as the membership it represents and real ground swell can influence direction and action for a balanced and responsive future - so get involved!.

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