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## Editorial

Welcome to the final edition of *Fine Print* for 1999. Of course we all know what that statement implies. It could be the end of the decade, the century, the millennium. We could be entering the last year of all the above. We have heard the debates; we have probably initiated and participated in those debates in our classrooms, staffrooms and community lives. Whichever side of the debate you sit on, *Fine Print* feels it is a fitting time to reflect on where we have been and where we are heading.

John Hodgens gives us an historical overview of representations of literacy and education. History, he claims, impacts forcefully on our current moment and may offer us some clues as to the current crisis. Hodgens traces the construction of this crisis along with changing definitions of 'literacy'. Definitions and perceptions of the term 'literacy' are significant, as they have been associated with other, value laden, terms such as 'morality' and 'civility'. Today's construction of this is that literacy practices and access to knowledges endorsed by the school system serve as a social distinction, marginalising those who practice other 'out of school' literacies. A question for the future is will these 'other' literacies be endorsed as 'legitimate elements of social knowledge'?

Peter Waterhouse reflects on the changing nature of work and the implications for the changing nature of literacy practices. Waterhouse points out that, as workers, we have some choice about how we embrace these changes. He suggests three types of possible response to change: the 'entrepreneurial advocate', the resistor, and the 'capacity builder'. Waterhouse believes there is the potential for us to be 'positioned as passive recipients of a future designed for us'. He advocates that as workers we have the capacity for making choices and that we need to develop, and encourage the development in our learners, the skills to 'read the world critically'.

Other readings of the world are highlighted by Chris Corbel in his discussion about the Internet and its implications for literacy. Highlighted again is the changing nature of literacy practices as the person in front of the screen has access to a

wider and continually changing range of resources, information and people. Corbel points out that the language and literacy of the web are group created, where we as literacy and language teachers have typically focused on text that is individually created. He asserts that the critical questions we have learnt to ask of print text still need to be asked of Web text. Often there is a fear among those who value literacy and literature that print based texts are dying, but Corbel is adamant they are not, in fact the opposite. He predicts that some text types, eg manuals, will disappear in their current format, but the broad range of literacy texts available in print have social value, and while they do they will live on.

You may be aware that *Fine Print* has conducted a poll over the last few months. We have been looking for responses from you in the field, for nominations of the great/greatest influences in adult language and literacy theory and practice. Thank you to all who sent in nominations. We have thoroughly enjoyed pouring over all your responses and hope you will find the summary of your responses enlightening. An interesting, and not surprising, finding from the poll is that our local talent is at least as, if not more than, inspiring as our national and international thinkers. This is a moving testimony to the many people who have worked hard and long for the benefit and professionalisation of the adult language and literacy field.

We also see the continuing debate surrounding the role of phonics in the teaching of reading. Kerry Hempenstall takes the opportunity to respond to Marie Emmitt's critique of his position in the spring edition of *Fine Print*. Hempenstall focusses on the reliability of research findings which are used in the debate and he stacks up a formidable array of supporting studies.

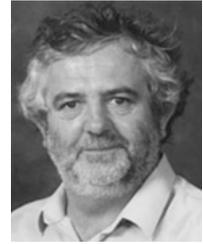
Finally, the *Fine Print* Editorial Group farewells Nick Gadd. Nick is resigning from the group after five dedicated years. Thanks Nick. Your insight and knowledge has inspired us.

The Editorial Group

**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.**

# The literacy crisis: representations of literacy in the late 20th century

by John Hodgens



Here, John Hodgens argues that we need to have a sound understanding of how literacy has been represented in the past to prepare for the debates of the new century.

If we want to speculate about the next millennium, we need to look to the past. My basic intention here is to set the “literacy crisis” of recent years in a long-term historical context. This also means setting the notion of literacy within broader “ideologies” i.e. systems of ideas and beliefs that serve to organise society at a very basic level, often carrying basic assumptions about the social order and the human subject or individual.

The term “literacy” is now in very widespread common usage. Going back beyond the 70s its use in popular press in Australia was very rare (Green, Hodgens & Luke, 1994). Going back beyond the 80s the field of literacy studies itself hardly existed. These facts seem odd in the context of current media reporting of literacy. Reports are frequent and often strident. They galvanise and create very strong polarisations of opinion. It is also evident that the literacy crisis as a media event is here for the foreseeable future. It has been firmly in place for more than 25 years and rather than showing signs of abating it is growing in strength certainly in the frequency of reporting if not the intensity and stridency of claims. The headlines themselves in one newspaper tell a story:

“Literacy test becomes a war of words” [*The Age*, Sunday, 21 September 1997, p10].

“Teachers condemn literacy debate as a farce” [*The Age*, Tuesday, 23 September 1997, p4].

“Howard gives Kemp his backing in literacy row” [*The Age*, Wednesday, 24 September 1997, p9].

“Kemp issues ultimatum in literacy showdown” [*The Age*, Thursday, 25 September 1997, p8]

“Illiteracy: remove those responsible” [*The Age*, Thursday, 25 September 1997, p16]

“Literacy levels a national scandal” [*The Age*, Thursday, 4 February, 1999, p.14] [Headline].

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in general

## Literacy and civility

“Literacy” in the modern sense of general and necessary skills in reading and writing first occurs American educational discourse in 1883 (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 1989). This is significant in that the very term “literacy” is linked with mass education.

It is evident, however, from recent research (Green, Hodgens & Luke, 1994) that even when “literacy” means general or basic skills it still tends to stand for or be associated with something else: morality, discipline, manners, politeness etc. Such is the metaphorical power of the terms “literacy” and “illiteracy” that they can stand for the moral state of the social order in general, or the entire current condition of education. Whatever their use in media representations, it almost never without a strong symbolic association.

The adjectives “literate” (1432) and “illiterate” (1556) have quite a long history. From its earliest usage “literate” meant “acquainted with letters or literature; educated, instructed or learned” and carried much of the modern meaning of “literary”. Both terms were key elements of the notion of *civility* which, by the late 16th century had become of the organising principle of European political order (Starobinski 1993; Hale 1993). “Civility” essentially meant the acceptance of the need for self control over natural urges, and orientation to “moral” social conventions. To be illiterate was to be uncultivated, given to unruly natural impulses, ungoverned, and therefore dangerous to both self and the social order. This ideology, based as it was on cultivation and social order, had class distinction already built into it. Civility and cultivation became increasingly defined in terms of codes of regulation, and manners which were part of an expanding social concern for order and respectability.

By the mid to late 18th century the notion of civility had been overtaken by the term “civilisation”. This, again, was a highly synthetic term in that it brought together notions of “improvements in comfort, advances in education, politer manners, cultivation of the arts and sciences, growth of commerce and industry, and acquisition of material goods

and luxuries" (Starobinski 1993, pp. 3–4). "Civilisation" was inseparably linked to a notion of "progress". Its polarised opposite was "savagery". These were key binary terms in 19th century Victorian ideology which guided and justified the expansion of the European nations with imperialist and colonialist ambitions. The notion of savagery was an extendable metaphor readily applied not only to "natives" abroad, but to women, children, criminals, the insane as well as "lower orders" of domestic society, and to other nations as a whole (Kuklick 1993).

Most importantly, the written word was central to the ideologies of "civility" and "civilisation". Consequently, the notion of literacy has always been prone to carry a heavy burden of associations to civility, civilisation, social and moral order, progress, development and propriety. Equally "illiteracy" has been the opposite of all these.

In the Victorian era, mass education became a key element of Empire. In Australia, up until the 60s, literacy was guided by the ideology of British subjectivity based on the Victorian notion of "civilisation". The reading curriculum was replete with snippets of "fine expression" examples of "proper" behaviour and "moral" individuals to be emulated. Aborigines, were always present in these texts. They were either sly, crafty and vicious "savages", or pathetic creatures who would die out because of an inability to adapt to Western civilisation. This was a mass curriculum aimed at moulding behaviour, attitudes and beliefs in a particular direction and based on the assumption, standing since the inception of mass state-funded education that few would go far beyond primary or junior secondary education. It was not a curriculum aimed at stretching children's intellects.

At the same time, state education was governed by a highly centralised bureaucracy. Certain groups and organisations such as employers exerted influence over educational policy when they perceived the need but, by and large, they did not have to. The system was already geared to their interests in producing a large pool of young people who would go directly into unskilled or semi-skilled work, or into an apprenticeship in their mid teens, who would be malleable and compliant to the demands of employers, and who would learn "on the job" perhaps supplemented by a trade certificate gained through "night school".

Educational policy was largely contained within the confines of the bureaucratic apparatus which would occasionally consult with powerful outside interest groups such as employers. It was largely taken for granted that education should be geared to the interests of employers, and these were clearly expressed in many early documents associated with state education in Britain and Australia.

During this period literacy or reading and writing were not issues of "public concern"; nor for that matter was education. At certain points such as the Great Depression, influential individuals made public statements on issues such as the

decline of the 3r's (Blackmore 1986, pp.27–28). But there was not the broad and constant public involvement in the issue of education that has characterised the "literacy crisis" of recent years. This did not occur in a regular form until the last quarter century.

The ideology of British subjectivity and accompanying strength of the bureaucracy were maintained well into the 60s, but in the aftermath of Sputnik in 1957, there were very significant changes. The response of Western governments to Sputnik was to develop the "pool of talent" with a view to producing a new scientific and technological elite (Karabel & Halsey 1977). The curriculum itself now became a focus of attention. The traditional humanistic and literary curriculum which had been in place for almost a century began to give way to new approaches developed by "behavioural science" which captured large areas of social policy in America at this point in time (Chomsky, 1969). The new American curricula, exemplified by S.R.A., rather than being innovative, reinforced the traditional views of the teaching of reading and writing—seen essentially as encoding and decoding by phonic and other skills. These materials were used increasingly in Australian schools from the early 60s.

Overall, following Sputnik, there were very significant shifts in education policy. Funding increased, and the Commonwealth made incursions into education and schooling which, to this time, had been the sole responsibility of the states. Most importantly, there were massive changes in the time-honoured curriculum. All of these changes occurred without large scale public debate or consultation.

During the 60s there was a further major shift in governmental policy towards education in the Western countries. Education came to be seen as a key factor in bringing about social equality (Karabel & Halsey 1977). From this point in time radical political critiques appeared of "the system". The curriculum focus was maintained and "innovation" and "change" became key terms in the new theories of curriculum. There were also new emphases on lifelong and continuing education. Technical education became the subject of Commonwealth policy. During the 70s Technical and Further Education became a field, but one encompassed often by powerful, negative assumptions. Adult literacy whether as further education, continuing education, or adult education was largely seen as a "second chance" provided by the state for those who had failed.

### The literacy crisis

The "literacy crisis" began during the mid 70s in Australia (Green, Hodgins & Luke, 1993). That is in the period of social change and progressive governmental policy between "technological functionalism" and the onset of "economic rationalism". The 60s had been a time of change in social values frequently marked out in generational differences. The literacy crisis, as reported from the mid 70s, built on an

the written word was central to the ideologies of "civility" and "civilisation"

earlier wave of reporting on moral decline in youth from the previous decade:

“Heads ask more power to curb students: schools are last bulwarks against sex, liquor and drugs”, [*The Age*, February 23, 1970, p.3]

From this point the media became a major player in the representation of literacy and education. Looking over the media reports over a period of twenty-five years, one of the strongest features of the “crisis” is repetition. Certain issues are simply recycled continuously. In Australia, the mid 70s saw the emergence of high rates of unemployment. Employers from this point in time were frequently reported as “noticing” a “decline” in literacy standards of job applicants.

“Illiterates Turned Out by Schools”, [*The Australian*, 3 March 1975]

This has been one of the constant themes of the crisis:

“Literacy getting worse, say employment agencies”, [*The Adelaide Advertiser*, February 29, 1984, p.18]

Claims focus not only on students but also on teachers:

“Kids matter more than teachers pride: we need standardised testing if we are to end the illiteracy plague”, [*The Australian*, Thursday 20 march, 1997, p11] [Headline].

“Illiteracy: remove those responsible”, *The Age*, Thursday, 25 September 1997, p16 [Headline].

“Minister slams teacher training”, *The Age*, Monday, 21 July 1997, p1[Headline].

The claims are often an open claim on the curriculum—and on school practice i.e. on lack of grammar and rules, lack of testing or lack of disciplinary practice in the school, or the lack of authoritative teaching and “tried and true” methods.

“Literacy Languishes While the Cult ‘Elitists’ Linger”, [*The Australian*, October 14, 1991, p 11] [Headline].

“Whatever happened to English grammar?”, [*The Age*, Tuesday 7 November, 1995, p12] [Headline].

While the crisis has an explicit focus on schooling, adults and adult literacy programs have always had a strong presence in the reports which are directed as much to the outcomes of schooling as present school practices. Testimonials by adult illiterates continue to be a mainstay of the reporting—invariably described as having “an armour of rationalisations and deceptions to carry their burden of shame” [*The Age*, Tuesday, 2 February, 1999, p.13] and

inevitably reflecting back on “irresponsible teachers” and “the system that failed them”.

Statistics have been a major aspect of reporting since the inception of the “crisis”. Numbers abound on every possible category: pre-schoolers, school students, girls, boys, state by state and nationally; and on adult deficiencies in literacy in general:

### following Sputnik, there were very significant shifts in education policy

“LITERACY: a shameful problem for every seventh Australian?”, [*Australian Womens Weekly*, September 24, 1977, pp.16–17] [Headline].

“1.5m can’t read or write”, [*Daily Mirror*, August 16, 1985, p.5] [Headline].

Since the emphasis on productivity in the late 80s, statistics often refer to specific categories of workers:

“More than 50 percent of construction, manufacturing, agriculture and utility workers...” [Inferior literacy skills a threat to many workers, *The Age*, Saturday, 31 January, 1998, p15].

A further change between the current moment and the mid 70s is the policy emphasis on youth unemployment.

“The Prime Minister, Mr John Howard, yesterday announced that young unemployed people who failed basic literacy and numeracy tests would have to attend remedial courses or lose some of their dole payments.” [Welfare groups attack plan, *The Age*, Friday 29 January, 1999].

### What is the actual effect of the “literacy crisis”?

The “crisis” has a number of effects. It generates and reinforces in a large section of the population deep levels of anxiety about the education system, and the state of the nation as a whole.

“Reading a dying art for one in five”, [*The Age*, Tuesday 10 September, 1995, p1] [Headline].

“National survey to aid war on illiteracy”, [*The Age*, 16 July, 1996, p1] [Headline].

These claims have become a more or less everyday belief for a large proportion of the population. Letters to the editor, talk-back radio and current affairs TV abound in forceful and deeply committed opinion, usually negative. The crisis gains much of its support by feeding on anxieties of parents about the futures of their children.

“Will your kids keep up as teaching turns tech?” [*The Age*, Wednesday, 30 July 1997, p3] [Headline].

At the same time representations of literacy help to keep in place a very traditional and conservative teaching practice, working against new approaches:

“Drills a sound practice”, [*The Age*, Tuesday, 9 September 1997, p5] [Headline].

Most importantly, the crisis justifies testing on a huge scale, as well as specification of “competencies”. These can, and certainly do, place constrictions on teaching and lead to questionable practices in schools e.g. streaming. Such is the currency of the debate in today’s climate that no government, regardless of its position on the political spectrum, could afford to be seen as neglecting the issue.

“Labor blamed for decline in literacy”, [*The Age*, Thursday, 10 April 1997, p2] [Headline].

It is also clear that educators have failed to respond to the claims in an effective way. This is no easy task. The explicit location of the crisis in media representations as “common sense” as opposed to “prevailing educational philosophies” (*The Age*, Thursday, February, 1999, p14) make the claims very difficult to shift. One of the distinctive characteristics of reporting is its anti-intellectual stance. Experts may claim one thing but “everyone knows” otherwise.

Claims made about literacy resonate strongly with the ideological climate of “economic rationalism” and fear of economic decline of the nation.

“...the fact is that we are failing to prepare our children for the tougher, more high-tech, more highly skilled workforce of the next century”, [*The Age*, Editorial, Friday 14 March, 1997, p. 12.

From this perspective, to be illiterate is to be undisciplined, to refuse social requirement at the most basic level, to be inflexible, unadaptable, dysfunctional, unproductive, immoral and unemployable.... These associations draw on very long-term ideologies of “civility” and “civilisation” which, clearly, are far from spent forces. To lack the qualities required by these organising principles is still to be a danger both to the self, and crucially, the social order. The end result is that the problem is located in the individual rather than being seen as an outcome of the system of education and its constraints.

### School and Out of School

History, then, impacts forcefully on the current moment, and history may also offer some clues about the current crisis which, more than anything, is a crisis of confidence in education and its institutions.

Jenny Cook-Gumperz (1986) points to the widespread, pluralistic literate practices that developed in informal settings and localised groups prior to the onset of mass education (p.21). The spread of printing indicates that a diversified literacy was a growing and wide-spread social phenomenon from very soon after its invention. Being able to read and write as well as deal with numbers in a systematic way had obvious benefits for many people. Sections of the “masses” generated their own purposeful literate practices, often of a radical political nature (Thompson, 1963). Cook-

Gumperz sees the establishment of mass schooling as a response to the popular literacies that already existed, with the purpose of bringing them under control of the established order (pp. 25–6).

Phillipe Aries (1996) following a similar line of argument suggests that the rise of modern schooling was a response to wide-spread informal schooling that was taking place in “workshop schools” across England, France and elsewhere in the 16th and 17th centuries. These schools run by artisans including scribes and master draughtsmen

had a clientele of adults and children. This was what would now be termed vocational education (1996, p. 286). Aries points to the separation of children from adults that has characterised modern schooling, emerging from the delayed religious and moralistic impulse of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation in the late seventeenth century. Children were seen as requiring protection from the world, as well as development of moral character and “reason”. They were taken to be “malleable” both morally and intellectually—in contrast with adults. The resulting foundation of modern schooling was characterised by a series of strong separations: between children and adults, between social classes, between children and families, and between schools and communities. Adults, as a result, became sidelined from mass education.

These separations set in place an ongoing tension between the order of the “school” and the “out of school” across Western history (Cook-Gumperz 1986). The school generally has sought to replace the existing subjectivity or identity of the child with a new kind of identity. Certainly at the start of the 20th century Emile Durkheim saw education in exactly these terms.

The problem with this view which seems to be central to mass education is that it does not recognise what certain classes of children already know and can do, and it does not recognise certain community (or social class) uses of language and literacy that are the basis of everyday knowledge of these children (Cook-Gumperz, 1986, pp. 41–2). The school has traditionally been cut off from the home and community as if to create the myth that it can and should be the sole educator. While there has been an increasing awareness on the part of some educators of the importance

representations of literacy help to keep in place a very traditional and conservative teaching practice

of recognition of “out of school” literacy practices (Heath 1983), the shape and direction of teaching practice in schools has been very insulated from the outside world and, as such, inevitably “abstract”. Many who go through the system are not given access to the sorts of literate practices endorsed by the school, and so are marginalised.

## Conclusion

The history of literacy is marked by differing orders of what counts as “real” literacy. Schools and other educational institutions, on the surface, exist to “educate”, to provide access to certain kinds of knowledge which, in turn, confer power. The majority, however, never get full access to these knowledges. The outcome is that adults who were only marginally successful in schooled literacy only read in a narrow range of literacies associated with certain specific personal interests. Because of the intensity of the political and moral ideology of education, these people are likely to avoid anything that hints of formal education, and do not regard what they do as “real reading”. They are likely to stay within a safety zone and tend to avoid straying outside the known.

Certified “knowledge” becomes a sign of social distinction. Lack of this certification and the view of illiteracy it implies suggests a whole range of socially unacceptable attributes characterised by an intensively felt stigma. This notion of literacy is a monolithic decontextualised version which results in the “Great Divide” between those deemed “literate” and “illiterate” (Street, 1991).

Literacy is a “technology” but one which cannot be separated from the social practices in which it occurs. It is a means to an end—not an end in itself. Yet much of the history of education has been to treat it as an end in itself, and to privilege a select number of uses and to confer on these uses a more or less magical significance. In the early part of this century it was felt that reading great literature would “civilise the masses”, bring about social harmony and understanding, and tame “the savage within”. In contrast, illiteracy would negate “civilisation” and “progress”, so the argument went. At the end of the century, literacy is seen to enhance “employability” of the individual and “productivity” and “viability” of the economy of the nation. Literacy is now taken as the key to maintenance of social cohesion of “advanced Western countries” as well as development of the “Third World”. It has become a universal indicator:

“Literacy Is a Human Right”, [The Age Saturday, September 9, 1989] [Editorial]

If history is a guide to the future, literacy will not be readily detached from the monolithic, inflated and unreal associations with morality, “civilisation” (Westernisation) and “progress”. Certain versions of literacy will still be used as

forms of social distinction, regulation and control. What counts as socially valuable literacy is already being reshaped by electronic media and computers.

The history of literacy in the West has been largely shaped by the institutions of education and geared towards certain kinds of subjectivity which have directed people in moral orientation, and the kinds of work they have undertaken. But the nature of work itself and the very opportunities for taking part in it are changing. According to Jeremy Rifkin “Redefining the role of the individual in a society absent of mass formal work, is perhaps, the seminal issue of the coming age” (1996, p. 235).

The internet certainly opens possibilities for uses of literacy. It is now a medium for expression of a huge diversity of human interests and has provided new opportunities for many people to engage in “out of school” literate practices. The situation is not unlike the widespread popular literacies that preceded mass education. But, equally, computers have enhanced opportunities for a new knowledge class to become controllers and purveyors of information creating “new divisions or power and powerlessness” (Rifkin 1996, p175).

The key issue for literacy education, in both school and adult forms, seems to be whether “out of school” community based literacies will be recognised as legitimate elements of social knowledge and the means of access to formal discourses of knowledge.

The media will, almost inevitably, be close and powerful players in the future shape of education and literacy programs. While media representations of the literacy crisis in recent years have been conservative reactions to educational change, alternative views are occasionally registered, and there is evidence of a significant critical response by sections of the public. Literacy and literacy education are likely to remain deeply political issues. But it is now possible that they will not be contained and shaped by overarching ideologies that remain uncontested.

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‘The history of literacy is marked by differing orders of what counts as “real” literacy’

# Reflections on the changing nature of work and literacies—we make the path by walking it

by Peter Waterhouse



In this article, Peter Waterhouse considers the types of literacies that will be important for work in the new millennium and how they might affect both teachers and learners.

It's interesting to reflect on how things have changed. When I first wrote for *Fine print* in 1982 I rattled out my text on a proudly purchased electric (not electronic) typewriter. I recall *Fine print* editorial meetings from around that time when the magazine was literally pieced together with a group of volunteers working around a table. There was much laughter, lively conversation and physical cutting and pasting. We discovered the wonders of 'magic tape', used 'white out' extensively and made banner headings with peel-off lettraset letters.

This 'paper' has been composed on two different computers and I will e-mail it to the editor. He will work with the file in its digital form on his computer and I imagine he will lay-out and edit the magazine without picking up scissors or sticky tape. It's all much more sophisticated nowadays. The work, and the literacies involved, have changed.

## For whom is work casual?

Work has changed for many of us. Recently with two colleagues, I conducted a Review of Research examining The Changing Nature and Patterns of Work and Implications for VET (Waterhouse, Wilson & Ewer, 1999). We reported that on the whole, the workforce has become more 'feminised' through shifting patterns of participation for men and women. Persistent structural unemployment has re-emerged as a significant factor and there are increasing numbers of workers who are employed part-time and as 'casuals'. Under-employment is also an issue with many workers wanting more work than they can obtain. We also reported that employment patterns have shifted across industries with declining jobs in manufacturing and increases in service industries. We noted the decline in unionism in the Australian workforce and we commented on knowledge as a new form of capital, highlighting the significance of knowledge workers, knowledge at work and knowledge for work.

Trying to sum up a complex picture we noted:

"the universality of the full-time permanent job, usually held by the male bread winner of the family, is increasingly a thing of the past. Although many

people still think of this as the norm, such positions now tend to be held by a relatively privileged minority. Instead there is evolving a more fragmented labour market characterised by a new distribution of paid work, in which the jobs of many are precarious while those with full-time jobs find themselves working longer hours." (Waterhouse, Wilson & Ewer, 1999, p.1–2)

However, we also noted in the review:

"the picture is not so homogeneous. The broad generalisations may not hold true for particular industries or within particular circumstances." (Waterhouse, Wilson & Ewer, p.2)

For instance the ALBE field is probably more masculinist now than it was the 1970s and early 80s. I suspect this is related to the increasing 'professionalisation' and institutionalisation of the field and a corresponding decline in volunteer work that is traditionally done more by women. Thus whilst the research literature suggests increasing 'feminisation' of the workforce (in general) the lived reality in particular circumstances may be different.

During 1994 I reflected on the nature of work in adult, community and vocational education. I put my thoughts in poetic form and in a parody of one of the literacies ALBE workers are often expected to teach—the letter of application.

Dear Director, Dean, Manager or Principal,

Re: Employment Opportunities

Might you have a vacancy for a reflective practitioner?

I'm learning to navigate Schon's swamp,  
to recognise corporate crocodiles  
& avoid administrative quicksand.

I'm becoming a critical thinker,  
awakened to the discourses of power & privilege.

I've mastered my TLAs\*  
CBT, ITB, RPL & the rest.

I'm right into Managing Change.  
I'll be clever & creative if I can,  
willing to give re-training  
& multi-skilling a go.

It seems there are two categories under which I might  
apply,  
Casual & Contract.  
I have only two questions.

If you said I could be a Casual Employee  
& I came in casual,  
wearing shorts, thongs & T-shirt,  
stashed my Esky under the desk,  
put my feet up & said,  
"OK dudes—what's on today?"  
You'd say I wasn't professional  
& show me how casual  
is easily made into casualty.

Yet when I rush between jobs  
hot & flustered in city traffic jams:  
when my mind is fractured into half a dozen different  
desks,  
in different places, with different faces,  
& what I want is always at the last one:  
when I'm forced to make a hostage  
of my professionalism  
& cram it into a cardboard box  
in the boot of my car:  
when my spouse spits the dummy  
at the endless unpaid hours  
of preparation & development  
& I am torn—because I respect my students  
& I want to do it for them:  
when I experience all of this,  
it doesn't seem very casual to me.

So I ask,  
for whom is casual employment casual?

But perhaps you say I can go on Contract.  
If so I can offer you professional  
commitment & competence  
integrity & loyalty  
dedication to the work.

Yet it seems your contract  
leaves little room for strategic planning,  
with staff security shrunk to single semesters.  
Curriculum Development is reduced to  
punching out packages for  
"flexible delivery"  
by the Unknown Trainers who win the tender  
& Professional Development  
doesn't rate a mention in your contract,  
though I'm sure you'll support me  
with smiles & words of encouragement.  
I notice your contract falls just short

of my vacation,  
but worse, far worse,  
it falls well short of my vocation.

I'm ready to work;  
prepared to be challenged & stretched—  
expanded to meet new horizons  
& to continue developing.

And so my second question is,  
why would you want to contract  
my professionalism & my profession?

The reactions I have had to this poem have confirmed that many adult educators identify strongly with it. However the pressures of 'contract' and 'casual' employment seem unlikely to dissipate in the near future. They raise challenging industrial and professional issues for ALBE practitioners and administrators. The lived reality of the 'trends' that are discussed by researchers, bureaucrats, administrators and politicians can be challenging and uncomfortable, particularly for those at the coal face.

Increasingly we find ourselves as portfolio workers—we don't have positions, we have projects. As market forces dictate we find ourselves and our professional skills identified as commodities to be bought and sold. Skills in flexibility and managing change become mandatory. We need to negotiate constantly and manage a complex set of frustrations, tensions, constraints and contradictions.

The 'right' answers do not always seem to be obvious and even when we have found an answer or strategy that works the ground seems to shift, circumstances change and we must adjust to a new set of variables. The only constant seems to be change. In our industry-based work we have found that teachers need a sophisticated repertoire of professional skills, including abilities that go well beyond traditional teaching or even curriculum development skills. (Sefton, Waterhouse & Deakin, eds, 1994, Waterhouse & Sefton 1997, Virgona et al 1998, Virgona, Waterhouse & Sefton 1998)

Over the past few years Seddon and some of her colleagues (Seddon, Angus & Brown 1997, Seddon & Brown 1997, Brown et al 1996) have investigated the nature and context of the changes affecting education including adult education and the VET sector. They conclude that the pressures and the changes have been, and continue to be, quite significant. Seddon's colleague Laurie Angus notes,

"It is the fundamental shift in teaching and managing that has occurred and is still occurring in TAFE that I believe must be appreciated. There has been an underpinning shift in norms, values and purposes ... it is ludicrous to argue that the nature of work in TAFE—for teachers, managers and support staff—has not become more complex and demanding." (Angus cited by Seddon 1998)

Experience and research across diverse workplaces suggests that such changes and their related pressures are widespread. It is not only adult educators experiencing such pressures. Few workplaces have escaped demands for change and whilst literacy is no longer the political 'flavour of the month' which it was some time ago, the socio-economic and political imperatives driving the processes of change are still present. There is a continuing requirement for workplaces to become sites for effective learning and for that learning to embrace the literacies most appropriate to the particular industry and context. (See Brown 1994, Darrah 1994, O'Connor ed 1994, Sefton, Deakin & Waterhouse eds 1994, Gee & Lankshear 1995, Gee, Hull & Lankshear 1996, Sefton, Waterhouse & Cooney 1995, Hager 1998).

### Responses to change

Seddon argues that the tensions and contradictions involved in these change processes can be 'lived' and 'worked' in different ways. They can be 'denied or harmonised out of existence, or they can be acknowledged and explored in order to identify new opportunities for action'. (Seddon 1994, p.6) The idea of 'working' or 'turning' contradictions suggests we need to be active in the face of change. Seddon suggests that responses to the challenges can be categorised in three types. Like all stereotypes they must be treated with caution, however the characteristics can be recognised.

#### Type 1 Response

What Seddon (1998) calls the 'entrepreneurial advocate'. These advocates adopt the rhetoric of reform and commercialisation. It is not difficult to hear their voices roaring through the winds of change. In staffrooms and coffee conversations they are sometimes referred to as 'cowboys'. They are eager to 'saddle up' and ride into the fray with guns blazing if necessary. They see themselves as change agents and marshals of what Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996) call the 'new work order'.

#### Type 2 Response

Reported by Seddon as one of resistance to change. Some of those in this category refer to themselves as 'dinosaurs'. They recognise their imminent danger of extinction but they find it difficult or impossible to change their ways. They are often proud of their values and practices and resentful that the world no longer seems to value them and their work.

#### Type 3 Response

Described by Seddon as 'capacity building' (Seddon, Angus & Brown 1997, Seddon & Malley 1998, Seddon 1998,). Capacity builders

"epitomise and embody the interface between continuity and change. They attend to 'new times', seek to contextualise themselves and their work in

relation to new pressures and demands, and to develop practices which accommodate both innovation and valued tradition." (Seddon 1998)

Capacity builders are neither cowboys nor dinosaurs—or perhaps they are parts of both—maybe they are the fast moving dinosaurs. Some archaeologists suggest that certain sorts of dinosaurs evolved into birds—perhaps there's a lesson in that theory. I want to be a capacity builder. If it turns out I need to fly, then I'll give it my best shot—point me into the breeze! Let me use the winds of change to gain lift and a better perspective.

The capacity builders are the ones who recognise and engage with the tensions and contradictions, they 'work' them; seeking constantly to build on the opportunities presented whilst avoiding or mitigating the potential for damage. They respond to crisis with courage and creativity. I was interested to learn that one of the Chinese characters for the concept of 'crisis' is composed of the symbols for 'danger' and 'opportunity'. Capacity builders are acutely aware of the dangers but they also recognise and seek to build upon the opportunities.

### Messy, indeterminate zones

Another way to think about this is to use Schon's (1983, 1987) ideas about problem framing and re-framing. In complex, constantly shifting real world practice Schon argues that problems are rarely clear-cut and neatly defined. There are usually multiple variables operating within any given situation and practitioners face conflicting demands. Schon likens the 'messy indeterminate zones' of professional practice to a swamp where text book solutions or strategies rarely seem to fit very well, if at all. Often, he suggests, the problem lies in defining and re-defining what the problems really are. The way we name and frame problems determines the solutions or strategies we adopt. Re-naming and re-framing problems enables us to see them with a new perspective leading to different strategies and solutions.

Both Seddon and Schon are suggesting the need for an active approach to life in the swamp. They see professional practice as a form of world building. It's a view that I find attractive. Some of the things we read, see and hear suggest that our future is already mapped out for us, all we need to do is step into it. We are positioned as passive recipients of a future designed for us. Coupled with this sense of inevitability there is often also a sense of urgency; not only must we accept the slot chosen for us, we must act immediately.

### World building

However we may choose to believe that "we make the path by walking it" (Horton & Freire 1990). We all have choices,

capacity  
builders ...  
recognise and  
engage with ...  
tensions and  
contradictions

some more than others. Over recent times I have been struck by the theme of multiplicity. We can talk of multiple literacies, multiple intelligences and ways of knowing, multiculturalism and multiple histories. Whilst dominant histories might suggest singular and unambiguous tales of our past others point to a rich tapestry of stories and voices with different tales. The black history of our country for instance tells quite different stories to that of the white literacies.

Through multiple voices of advocacy and protest the 'legal' concept of 'terra nullius' can now be seen as a kind of whitefella creation myth; a story made 'true' by the power of the dominant discourse to create complex belief systems which legitimise particular ways of knowing and being. Perceived in this way we may even see some parallels to the powerful Aboriginal myths of the Rainbow Serpent and other creation beings. We are left with choices about our history.

In similar fashion capacity builders see multiple possible futures and some are better than others. However our capacity for making choices, working contradictions and future building depends a good deal on our ability to know what is important. Seddon reminds us, "You can really only protect what you value if you know what you value" (Seddon 1994a, p.15). Our choices also need to be informed, based upon knowledge of the likely implications and possible consequences—and this information is not always readily available.

### Shock-proof shit detectors

The literacies we need, as teachers and learners are those which help us to 'read the world' critically. In an age awash with information we do not always need more of it. Even if we were to spend all of our waking hours trying to 'keep up' with the flow of information we could not do so. The truth is we do not need to, not all of it is important. Ernest Hemingway suggested that the most important attribute of a writer is to have a personal, "built in, shock-proof shit detector" (Hemingway cited by Plimpton 1983). If literacy helps us to know the difference between what's important and what isn't, if it helps strengthen our personal 'crap detectors' it will serve us well for the futures we build and for those served up to us.

Doubtless there will be new literacies that we will need to learn, and to teach. We can also be sure that there will be some voices suggesting that particular 'new literacies' are absolutely essential for life in the 'new' millennium. "For whose new millennium?" we might ask. What will not change is the need to ask the critical questions, to 'read between the lines' (which we can learn to do even if we can't read the lines). Literacies for employment and lifelong learning will continue to be important. Some of them will be technological literacies. We will need to learn and control them as useful tools for our purposes, for others will surely use them for theirs.

### Virtual Learning on the World Wide Web

Canned Learning is with us,  
not only do we have shrink wrapped packages for  
flexible delivery  
we now have virtual learning on the World Wide  
Web.

We're told we can Down Load and Save Up  
everything we want from anywhere in the world, no  
worries.

No need to lug heavy books to and from the library,  
with memorised Web-site addresses  
and simultaneous multi-connection searches  
our user-friendly Windows based  
Yahoo Wonderful Web browser  
will engage artificial intelligence  
to search a million electronic locations  
quicker than you can find a  
Dewey Decimal Reference number on the middle  
shelf—

even when you're wearing your best spectacles.  
In little more than the blink of an eye  
your printer will be pouring out the entrails and E-  
mails

of a zillion users from all over the globe.

The Web knows no boundaries,  
spanning Hyperspace it crosses  
nations and oceans without effort,  
leaps cultures and communities  
without even a single bound  
—the effort's not necessary in Hyperspace.

In virtual reality teachers need know no fear,  
laboratory experiments never blow up in your face  
and instruments are never stolen  
from the virtual laboratory.

Hyperspace offers infinite opportunities  
for exploration, innovation and personal  
development.

For some of us the future is clear, it is already here,  
in the virtual world the Web is revolutionising  
information dissemination.

In the real world  
most of the planet's people  
have not yet used a computer,  
although Tokyo now has as many telephone lines as  
all of Africa  
and the multi-media moguls are amassing million\$.

Early morning sunshine dances over droplets of dew  
which tremble upon the delicate structure of a  
suspended silken web.

It is captivating, spectacularly beautiful, surprisingly  
strong.

Marvelling at its architecture  
I note with grim admiration that here  
webs are spun by spiders.

They are predators' nets, cast to catch their prey.  
I wonder how many new victims  
the World Wide Web has snared today.

Even super sensitive Hemingway crap detectors will not be enough for the new millennium. Of course we will also need literacy for learning—at work and at home (which might be the same place anyway). But the literacies we will need are those we have always needed; the poetry, stories and dramas to inspire the hope, creativity and courage to build better communities and futures together.

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# The ALBE educator of the century

*Fine Print* asked teachers to name the most influential educators/thinkers in the ALBE field—this is what they said.

During October and November *Fine Print* conducted a poll among adult language and literacy practitioners. Our intention was to collect nominations for the most influential educators and/or educational thinkers who have had an impact on our teaching practice or on the way we think about teaching and learning. Here is a summary of your nominations:

On the global scene **Paulo Friere** received many nominations. Some of the explanations included:

- Paulo Freire has had a huge impact on the field of adult literacy world wide. From his original writings others have written and developed other ideas and practical applications of those ideas. In my own teaching I have both benefited from Freire's work and the work of those who have been inspired to write and develop his ideas
- Paulo Freire for distinguishing between education for domestication and education for liberation, for drawing our attention to the inextricable relationship between 'reading the word' and 'reading the world' and for stressing the power of naming and for urging us to begin our work against social injustices by formulating the most politically generative questions
- Paulo Freire was the first to talk specifically about adult literacy and the notion of empowerment, and to link education with the wider world

Overwhelmingly our most popular local inspiration is **Rob McCormack** who is clearly held in high regard in the adult language and literacy field in Victoria. Your comments on Rob's contribution to our field include:

- Rob McCormack raised the academic credibility of the ALBE field and made us all take the job seriously
- Rob McCormack, author of *Learning to Learn* (with Geraldine Pancini), *The World of Work* and *Public Literacy* (with Peter Moraitis), for linking our educational thinking to the big philosophical debates concerning the past, present and future
- Rob McCormack has had an impact on my teaching because of his ability to write so clearly and passionately about contemporary issues in the field and provide such interesting references to the theorists who had influenced his thinking. Also his contributions to the field through "Learning to Learn", "World of Work" and "Public Literacy" did much to demystify and provide understandings and strategies for successful outcomes in a variety of contexts
- Rob McCormack's work has been of enormous theoretical and practical significance. His description of the four literacies; for public debate, knowledge, self expression and practical purposes. In *Framing the Field* he provided

a critical part of the underpinning of the CGEA. The *World of Work* showed how resources can be developed for language and literacy learners which address complex topics and relate personal experiences to wider trends and debates. Both of those texts made a big difference to my teaching

- Rob McCormack has created an environment for intellectual rigour and debate around ALBE
- Rob McCormack's texts contain very useable practical strategies that break genres and knowledge down into manageable ideas
- Rob McCormack provided insight into a viable theoretical context for development of curriculum and teaching practices, enthused teachers in the ALBE area with the importance of recognising the role of theory in ALBE educational practices, and in gaining credibility within the worlds of academia and government. He produced very enjoyable and practical teaching materials through project work

There were a number of **collective nominations** where clearly practitioners have read widely and drawn links between the theories and writings of different educators/thinkers. These include:

- For me, the most influential writers in education have been the following people: Ian Hunter, James Donald, Valerie Walkerdine and Jim Martin. Reading them gave me a critical framework and a vocabulary for disentangling the mess created by thirty (and more) years of progressivist hegemony in education as well as a basis for deciding what people need to learn and how to teach it in a clear, explicit and accessible way
- In linguistics the influence of Michael Halliday and Jim Martin has been profound, particularly through the application of functional linguistics to education by people like Fran Christie and Sue Hood. They provide a rationale for what you are trying to achieve as a language and literacy educator, a language to talk about language, and a methodology that works.
- Mary Kalantsis and Bill Cope for their commitment to incorporating critical multicultural perspectives into all educational work
- Allan Luke and Peter Freebody who made me think seriously about what I was teaching and how students were learning when they wrote about the reader being a code breaker, text user, text participant and text analyst. Most significant and challenging for me was the discussion of the simultaneous nature of these
- Kristine Brown and Sue Hood—their *Writing Matters* was around just when I started in the field and got me straight into a text based approach

- The influence of both Delia Bradshaw and Helen Gribble in their earlier work as practitioners and writers and in current times, providing a broad and inclusive page on which to write our practice

**Other nominations included (some are mentioned again individually):**

- (The late) Arch Nelson who gave credibility and diversity to adult education in Australia and overseas. He made certain that government recognised a leadership responsibility for lifelong learning, long before the phrase had been coined
- Joe Lo Bianco for writing in a way that positions policy within a broader framework.
- Fran Christie because she has consistently maintained that education is about teaching and learning, that teaching is a craft and that teachers are (or need to become) experts, rejecting completely the teacher as facilitator approach put up by both the left and the right
- Jim Martin for introducing the importance of explicit pedagogy particularly for groups of people unfamiliar with the discourses of power.
- Delia Bradshaw who seems to be able to clarify and articulate complex concepts and ideas in the wink of an eye, simultaneously implying that they were your ideas anyway
- James Gee for his Discourse theory work and the way this has helped the debate of literacy as a sociocultural construct. Some would argue, and they would be right, that Street said all this before Gee. Maybe it is just Gee's sense of humour I like and am moved by, but he makes the point about literacy being political and contingent very well and he also has a very interesting point about acquisition and learning
- Vygotsky who provides a good model of learning to apply when assisting students to get to the next stage
- Brian Cambourne who asserts that if the right conditions are there, people will learn to read and write
- Bernie Neville looks at the whole person in the learning situation and reminds us that learning at its best is entertaining, broadening and fun
- A.S.Neill, founder of 'Summerhill' and author of book by same name who opened my eyes to new (to me) ways in education
- Robin Usher (whose) interpretations of adult education from postmodern perspectives ring bells with me
- Sue Middleton for documenting how our own personal, social and educational histories inevitably shape how and why we teach
- Jane Thompson for reminding us of the time-honoured concept of 'really useful knowledge'
- Nancy Jackson for encouraging us to consider "If competence is the answer, what is the question?"
- Gunther Kress for asking us to be mindful of the social consequences of the curriculum choices we make, for accentuating the prevalence and power of images and design in texts
- David Rose who talks about the importance of using texts that are above students' current reading level and taking

a scaffolding approach to allow students to develop competence in reading and writing these texts

- Toula Karayannis, an inspiring networker and coordinator. A hard act to follow, but when I started out in adult education, she was not only a mover and shaker, she was prepared to be a mentor as well
- Fran O'Neill for introducing me to practical applications of critical literacy (as opposed to impractical posturing of which there is way too much in the ALBE field).
- Bill Daly for showing me ways to analyse a particular text type and teach it
- Philip McIntyre for translating the CSWE into practice and for making it make sense
- Dom Nelson who ensured that staff development and professional development were integral to emerging professionalism during the early days of ALBE, and that this development received government financial support. She built the principles of social justice into early policy and practice within ALBE

And to acknowledge the integral location of **numeracy** in the ALBE field this tribute was made:

Along with some great educators in the literacy field there are a number who have pushed the numeracy barrow virtually from infancy. Two who need to be recognized are **Dave Tout** and **Beth Marr**.

Once Dave began teaching adults he quickly became aware that traditional mathematics teaching especially at the secondary level was leaving many students ill-equipped to tackle maths beyond the classroom. He pushed for numeracy to be taught in context through hands-on materials, group work and on a needs basis. He was active in the early days to promote numeracy politically and to establish links to the literacy field, at one stage being the VALBEC secretary. His influence continues in many ways, he was and still is one of the driving forces behind ARIS.

Beth Marr's contribution to the field has been vast particular in the areas of resources and professional development. She pays considerable attention to detail to ensure that activities are relevant, beneficial, balanced and engaging. The wide range of providers and practitioners who make use of these materials is an indication of Beth's impact.

And finally and fittingly many of us acknowledge our peers and colleagues, our daily working mentors. These comments seem to sum it up:

I nominate all the teachers and students with whom I've worked over the years for constantly leading me to ask "Why am I doing this? How can I do it better?"

We nominate our own teachers, peers and colleagues – for inspiration, ideas, discussions, support

*Fine Print* thanks each of you who has taken the time to contribute to this poll.

# Where does this (super)highway go?

## An Interview with Chris Corbel



*Fine Print* caught up with Chris Corbel and asked him for some predictions for what technologies will be significant for teachers and learners post 2000.

### **Maybe we could start with some general observations about the Internet and its effects.**

Well O.K. just look at the two things which have become very strong as a result of the internet, one is that capitalism is stronger than ever, the global financial market operates in a way that was not possible before, in a sense a certain set of economic imperatives and economic forces have been able to thrive in this new environment.

### **For example a produce made in Poughkeepsie say can be sold in Bendigo?**

Indeed that's right, so you've got new distribution mechanisms, new marketing mechanisms new reach for things that you might be doing. But also just global cover itself transcending national boundaries just you know, able to operate in conglomerates and aggregations that are not related to location necessarily.

### **Yes—you pay your local phone bill to a company in Western Australia perhaps...**

Exactly, or in Western Europe. This picks up a on an idea I have been quite keen on in all of this—the idea that the changes that are happening haven't caused things to happen but they have allowed things to happen, and it is a fundamental difference...

... its like, take for example the empty building block out there—the building has been knocked down. In a sense you would say the environment has been changed, now left to itself what we would typically see in a vacant lot that the weeds would grow and you would have to say "What is it about weeds that will grow instead of flowers?" Now, if you think of global capitalism like a weed, adapting is the key word because I see this not as a technological thing but an organic thing ... certain ideas are or certain ways of doing things are more able to flourish in changed circumstances. Now whether it's chat groups—Neo-nazis or Green Peace—what you have got is that they are both strong as well, both of them are able to flourish in the environment because they are able to send their sort of little tentacles out globally to get to the sources of nourishment—people who are all on their own. You cannot say that the Internet is causing neo-nazis—what we can say that this new environment allows certain ideas to propagate more widely than if they were in

the previous environment of pen and paper, centrally controlled newspapers and so on.

### **But what are the particular different skills you might say, that teacher might need to teach and learners need to learn if they are to flourish like weeds? Critical, adaptive skills seem to be ...**

OK, teachers need to have an understanding of what the changes are. We need to focus here on the idea that computers are often seen as hard determinism—computers are seen to cause something, or computers have the power to do something if we 'unleash the power'. My view is that is not how it is, a soft determinism is to say that computers are part of a change that means the environment is different and opportunities are different—some things close some things open.

I think language teachers and literacy teachers are aware of that in a sense in which they are seeing some sort of engagement with this as part of the new sorts of literacy of every day life. So people are picking up teaching of email and web pages and so on as part of this. We've seen particularly things like email, an emergence of that as a new type of text that nobody predicted. I think in retrospect, if we pick up the weed metaphor, you can see why—it's simple it's everywhere, it's quick, it's opportunistic it's unlike the web page, unlike video disks.

So there is a point here about what is likely to last and what likely to be of value. I guess the only certain prediction is that whatever you say will be wrong. One of my favorite examples of predictions is that TV will kill Radio. Now what happened to Radio as a result of TV is a really interesting case, because Radio is as strong as ever, but its different. So the combined change is that prior to TV the Radio sat in a position of prominence in the lounge room where the TV now sits. When the TV replaced the Radio, the radio didn't die; what it did was move to the kitchen, moved to the car, moved to the bedroom, moved to the clock.

### **What about voice mail? Someone raised it with me recently that potentially the need for reading and writing will be reduced by voice technology that converts speech into text.**

I think voice will be used but we can't predict how. There is the assumption that voice is going to make things simpler

and in fact easier. This is an assumption that is made by the computer companies who assume that the 'natural' language interface is the holy grail in future years, that there will be never any question from a language or literacy point of view that it may be that spoken language is not a very efficient and effective way to do certain tasks.

But who knows? There will be people looking for ideas then grabbing them. But ultimately certain things will converge and not just the individual thing of voice, but it will be voice plus something else will happen. Then suddenly it will be, "Oh yeah, I can see why that happened", but you could never have seen it happening beforehand.

**We've asked a number of contributors for this edition to have a go at predicting the future of ALBE and the answers that keep coming back is this one, "We don't know—the only thing to do is keep on asking critical questions." Is there nothing you can confidently foresee?**

I guess this tone sounds a little bit almost fatalistic or as if effort doesn't matter. I mean I think we can work towards certain things but I don't feel deterministic about these things. I've had a lot of discussion about technology and CALL and it does fall into hard determinism and soft determinism. I'm saying that computers do make a difference but that they don't make the difference that we think they do. My feeling in all of this, is always back to McLuhan—even though he never saw a personal computer. We are so convinced that what counts is the message, where his famous thing is about 'the medium is the message' actually means that the apparent message doesn't matter. The real message of TV is not in fact what you see on TV but the fact that you sit around the room and look away from each other, or you don't converse with each other. The message of the car is not transport it's the suburbs...that sort of thing.

**O.K. so what's the message of the developing technologies?**

O.K. so the message of computing is that types of text emerge which allow for different types of activities. So you could say that the broad message of the Internet is late Twentieth Century Capitalism ... or globalisation is the message of the Internet in the sense that it facilitates that change to happen.

For the person sitting in front of the screen, the message is that they now have the capacity to have access to information and people over a wider range of resources. Ironically, at the same time distancing themselves from those physically closer to them. So you could argue that there are two types of communities coming from the Internet—one is there is the online community which redefines that sense of a people with a common sort of interest but not a co—location; then there is the old sense of community which was people with

not necessarily the same sorts of interests, but co-location. A fundamental difference of dynamics emerges from that.

**Although it could be said that there is a broader range of communities online than people we experience locally. Do we need a broader range of ways of reading and writing?**

What is it about weeds that will grow instead of flowers?

I think that it's interesting—I've written a book on computer literacies and the basic idea of that book is that text online—the medium—does make a difference. Any text on paper and any text online have fundamental differences you need to understand in order to work effectively online. Fundamental differences like malleability of text itself—you may be able to modify it, even if it is presented to you as a completed artifact. You interact with it differently—its physicality is removed from you in a way paper isn't, you have to manipulate it indirectly and symbolically. And this sort of mediation and the kind of manipulation of symbols, rather than the manipulation of objects is a fundamental difference. That once you understand the nature of any screen-based text, and its different; that's a good starting point. Because whether it's a spreadsheet, whether its email, whether it's a web page, they all have these fundamental characteristics. That said, at the same time you have got to see what a thought on paper, on the screen might also have in common. So basically what the book says is that you have got a certain set of basic differences that are effective on the medium, rather than the text type. A lot of the work on literacy sees genre as fundamental, but I am saying even more fundamental than that is the medium.

It's an interesting phenomenon to notice now a lot of web pages now have a button if you want to print it. Basically it says if you don't want to print this as it appears here, print it to get a printable version. Now that is interesting arrangement because its saying that the unmarked form, the most valued form, is the onscreen version. And the marked form the one you have got to choose to as an alternative, is that printed out on paper. It prints better but it's not as attractive as the one you have on the screen. Increasingly, it is the documents that you produce electronically that are socially valued. Power Point presentations for example, are not documents which will find their way onto paper; it's a performance to be done on the screen. When you print it up, it doesn't look too good, it wastes paper, it breaks all the rules about good paper use.

Then there's the further question about who has done the work to create that complex text. The theory is that it's the empowered individual who has developed all these capacities to make this text. The reality is the same power relationships in business and just about everywhere else still exists. I mean if you see a Senior Executive with a PowerPoint presentation, you know that that person didn't do it—they had their personal assistant do it, or the young

guy down there who everybody knows can do PowerPoint or they've sent it out to a place that specialises in PowerPoint.

**I take your point—was it Halliday (and others) who said that every text represents these other relationships? This is a classic case of how texts reflect a changing office politics and structure which is clearly part of the underlying literacy learners and teachers need to understand.**

Yes—if you acknowledge that, you also start to realise it's creating new types of texts because traditionally we as literacy specialists focus on text types which are created by individuals whereas increasingly text online starts taking on the characteristics of other text types which are typically group created—like in the entertainment industry and in film and even in PowerPoint it's often been from groups coming together.

**Interestingly, collaborative work has been part of teacher practice for quite a while now—although there's sometimes a battle because some learners don't like group work. It's a tricky issue.**

I think it is important that we pick these sorts of things up—a lot of what we are already doing and what you know is in a sense so basic to what we do that we don't see it any more. It's interesting that collaborative individuals work predated a capacity for new text types based on collaborative work. It's not that the technological environment created certain collaborative styles, it's just allowed people who have them to become more dominant.

**Society is split though around technology issues. Some people are working in these wonderful collaborative office spaces and some people are still on a line counting chooks or something with completely different types of literacies.**

Well I think it's about understanding what has value in the area in which you are working. It still remains as it always has: "What are the valued text types in the area you work in or in the area you want to be working in?". "How are they created and what are the power relationships", and I think that this is true whether it was the group-based annual report of twenty years ago, or the organisation Web page now.

**So the need to ask those questions remains the constant?**

Yes, I think it's still a critical perspective that you would ask of any text. The difficulty is that is the relationship of critical perspective to new types of online text. I think people will continue to read traditional paper-based texts like novels, the difference is that novels may not be as socially valued and the skill of reading a complex novel may not be as valuable in the marketplace as it might have been in the past.

**As opposed to the skills of bringing together a number of disparate texts as we tend to do on the web?**

Precisely that—the idea that increasingly when working online you don't actually analyse and synthesise; you collect. You go out and you bookmark and you bookmark you put in links; you don't have to actually analyse—everything is constantly deferred. The difficulty is knowing at what point you say, "The deferral stops here".

**At what point is that reached? And is it possible to be quite specific about maybe what critical questions need to be asked by the developing reader ... or any reader for that matter?**

They can be the same traditional questions about levels of engagement of decoding through to the standard four levels through to the critical type questions—lots of, "What's it doing to me", types of questions. I think that those ones are still legitimate. What worries me a little bit is that the critique in a strongly visual context will be critique of style rather than content. On the site you may make judgements on the color, its activity, how slow it is, all sorts of things like that. Now, maybe I'm sounding critical about that just because I'm coming from an old perspective.

I think it's really worth thinking about the forms of visual literacy in, that we are thinking in, that the valuable text now are ones where they realise that the message is in the style as well. So from one point of view the kids are right to critique the style, because you are making a conscious judgement on it. If they are conscious of style as increasingly I think they are.

**Do people make choices about content over design? Is there a point when people say, "This site is actually more interesting than its flashier comparison for its content—I'll read it instead."**

If you go down to the most popular sites they are very strongly text based. Go to Yahoo, Amazon or the Age—any of them—and they have a lot more text than you would have had a year or eighteen months ago. But it's not because the text is interesting, it might be, it's partly because it's proven as a navigation mechanism—media rich sites with only a few points to click through are actually harder to work with both cognitively and in terms of speed. So from a very pragmatic point of view all of the top sites have come back and realised people want a lot on one level—shallow sites and a lot spread around. Now, that is a literacy issue because we are back to scanning, to looking at a whole lot of areas like that instead of just clicking through.

**Yes, it suggests that print is a long way from dead.**

Absolutely in fact quite the opposite. People are saying, "Look, as a result of email we're writing more letters than we ever used to". I really think that is true. The problem is

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not that print will disappear the issue is that certain recognisable type of text will change their format, for example the novel will always stay on paper, but the manuals will increasingly be on line. Even though people don't like using them necessarily they'll find if you update the software you won't get a paper—based manual anymore. What we get is a much more complex mix, all sorts of bits and pieces, niches, galleries and all sorts of interesting stuff.

**Does that suggest then literacy will become too complex to cover in a general literacy class.**

Yes, well that's an interesting one, I guess you could say to some extent when we understand the range of literacies and the range of text types that have to be mastered in future, for the rest of your life, you could argue that there are now more. In addition to having to master certain standard and valued text types, you now have to master Web pages and Email and so on. But the questions then would be is to go back to the ones that are socially valued and which ones are significantly of value to you. I would argue that there is no social value in mastering Chat, because Chat is not a socially valued text type.

**Our times running out. Maybe we could circle back to a focus on students and this blossoming of texts. You can't do them all, so you have to make priorities about which are the most meaningful. There is a danger of ghettoisation if you are only reading text from a particular community.**

The problem with the online communities is that it's so childish in a way, that everybody thinks the same, now it seems to be a very kind of simple view of how life is in a way.

**It's interesting. Within the four levels of the CGEA—as people move through the different levels—the emphasis is on taking on board different perceptions, you know, adapting their stance in the light of other opinion and so on. And you're suggesting that the internet actually militates against that?**

Yes it enables you to bypass all of the unpleasant stuff, and you are absolutely right. It raises questions about whether it is a particularly liberating and democratising force. What it does do is it creates the circumstances where everybody can agree with each other. But they don't ever have to deal with living with people they don't agree with. So ironically this has often been presented globally that we can hear about things that governments prevent us hearing about, this is democratising and liberating. And a classic example is the during the Tienamin Square massacre there were emails coming out that so the world knew what was really happening. But its just not that simple—so much of the imagery of the internet is a sort of eighteenth century

Rousseau-esque sort of thing, or from 'the frontier' of the white, anglo male.

**At the same time, you've got "geek girls".**

Oh yes, but the dominant metaphors are the tones the thing is kind of run by—in spite of all the geek girls, in spite of all other forces that are out there. I don't think it's the technology that exacerbating this, but the changed environment may mean that it's not everybody benefits from it in the same way. There has been a lot of talk about the digital divide, its been coming up quite a lot lately. It's clearly split on income, education, gender, ethnicity. It's split on national lines, but it's also split within cities in the United States between areas between suburbs.

**Maybe we could finish with looking at things about the actual teaching of new skills—we talked about critical questioning ...**

Well again, there are both new skills that are an extension of existing skills and new skills because of the medium. When you're working with documents on the screen you've got to learn how to manage multiple documents, manage multiple screens and so on. There is a whole lot of different ways of doing that, so the basic issue is the same, but the mechanisms are going to be different. And so you have got to learn what they are, and many people don't—the little boxes and little lines around the crosses, and

windows and things. We find that around the training courses that very few people can easily shuffle these things around. So at a very practical level there are skills like that to do with manipulating electronic texts, working with them efficiently.

**That's simply a question of being given time to learn them though?**

Yes, but some of the things are to do with the fact that the texts are of a certain kind—I'll give a practical example. When you learn skills in word—processing you are typically shown how to indent, how to bold, or something like that. I'd argue that that's typically taught in a paper—based way ... you know, you highlight the text by clicking on it or going to 'Control + B' or something like that. The concept of style in word—processing is something that very few people understand and work with, and yet a style is quintessentially an online or electronic concept, because it's based on the idea of what is displayed on the screen is not on the screen in the same way that that print is on the paper. It is there because this message has been sent to the screen to display it, so change the message and you change the mistake—don't change the screen, change the message.

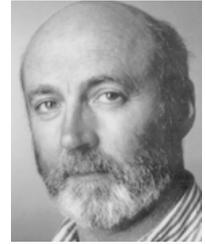
You might call up the style and you redefine normal to be 12 point you know instead of 10; you might change the heading size to 14 and so on. And then the text changes

Continued on p35 ...

in addition to having to master certain standard and valued text types, you now have to master Web pages and Email and so on

# The role of phonics in learning to read: a rejoinder to Emmitt's critique

by Kerry Hempenstall



In what is turning into an ongoing discussion about the role of phonics in the teaching of reading, Kerry Hempenstall responds to Marie Emmitt's critique in the last edition of *Fine print*.

Emmitt (1999) provides a response to the article "The role of phonics in learning to read: What does recent research say?" by Kerry Hempenstall, *Fine print*, Volume 22, No. 1, 1999. However, she has chosen to respond in a largely political rather than pedagogical framework. She attempts to discredit the author, alleging the arguments presented should be dismissed because they emanate from an (undefined) "narrow ideological viewpoint". She then follows in Goodman's (1998) wake, employing the strategy of rejecting research findings with which she disagrees, blithely dismissing a huge corpus of work as incompetent or corrupt.

More disappointingly, she avoids serious discussion of the major issues presented in the original paper. Since the original article discussed the role of phonics in learning to read, and on two occasions she agrees that phonics are important, I was hopeful that she would outline precisely where we differ so that rational debate might ensue. Rather than being open about the sort of phonics she favours, Emmitt offers the vague assertion that the best approach to phonics is whatever individual teachers decide, providing they don't elect for a commercial reading program. This issue is important because research has highlighted that not all phonics approaches are equally effective.

Since Emmitt is unforthcoming about what sort of phonics she favours, it may be instructive to consider the views that Whole Language luminaries have expressed about phonics over the years. This is particularly salient as these writers have been the major influences on those who train teachers, whether in pre-service or in-service settings. Teachers, who Emmitt is confident are in the best position to determine what phonics (and for which students), will have had these assertions strongly inculcated during their training. Employing the words of some of the major players in the Whole Language movement may also assuage Emmitt's concern that I make "distorted claims about the nature of Whole Language".

## What Whole Language commentators have said about phonics

"Sounding out a word is cumbersome, time consuming, and unnecessary. By using context, we

can identify words with only minimal attention to grapho/phonemic cues. ... The message then seems clear: we should help children learn to use context first" (Weaver, 1988).

"Phonics, which means teaching a set of spelling to sound correspondence rules that permit the decoding of written language into speech, just does not work" (Smith, 1985).

"Phonics is a flat-earth view of the world, since it rejects modern science about reading and writing and how they develop" (Goodman, 1986).

"Phonics ... is incompatible with a Whole Language perspective on reading and therefore is rejected" (Watson, 1989).

"It has become crystal clear to me that children learn phonics best after they can already read." (Routman, 1994 p.44).

"Foremost on the list of Don'ts are sound-it-out, and look-for-familiar-word-parts-within-the-word, because these activities divert the reader's attention from meaning." *Whole Language Teachers Newsletter* (Spring, 1988).

“ We in  
Australia  
cannot afford  
to be insular  
or cavalier ”

## How well have teachers been trained to teach phonics?

Emmitt expresses the reasonable view that teachers need a good understanding of phonics, though does not indicate whether she believes this is currently the case, or how it might be ensured. In his 1998 statement to the National Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources, Dr. G. Reid Lyon, chief of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) estimated that fewer than 10% of teachers have been appropriately trained to take advantage of the findings on reading development and instruction.

"As evidence mounts that reading difficulties originate in large part from difficulties in developing phoneme awareness, phonics, reading fluency, and reading comprehension strategies, the need for informed instruction for the millions of children with

insufficient reading skills is an increasingly urgent problem. Unfortunately, several recent studies and surveys of teacher knowledge about reading development and difficulties indicate that many teachers are under-prepared to teach reading" (Lyon, 1998).

Given the tenor of the pronouncements about phonics from some of the major protagonists for Whole Language it is unsurprising that teachers may have not been well served in their training. Both in Great Britain and in the USA huge sums of money are currently being set aside so that teachers can be retrained in how to teach (rather than facilitate) reading, making use of the best available knowledge about reading development and instruction.

#### **What about these overseas trends? Might they presage future directions in Australia?**

Emmitt attacks the national Reading Excellence Act (1999), an Act ensuring that federal funding will only be provided to literacy programs that are demonstratively effective. This eminently reasonable criterion has been attacked by most Whole Language advocates because there is little evidence for the effectiveness of their model, and hence funding will not be forthcoming until they are able to make serious evaluations. The response of Whole Language stakeholders such as Goodman (1998) has been to blame it all on a massive conspiracy of Christian fundamentalists and the extreme right-wing. Emmitt, too, alludes mysteriously to "certain groups" as the culprits, dismissing the possibility that the basis for the Act may relate to concern about the nation's illiteracy rate.

She also claims that the recommendations of the Act are based upon research that was not peer reviewed. This is untrue—there is a solid consensus among reading researchers about the actual basis for the Act. The strongest influence on the Act is not the result of a conspiracy as Emmitt would have it, but arises largely through the massively funded research efforts of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) over the past 33 years. The reading development of 34,000 children and adults has been studied, many for up to 12 years. Over the past 15 years, Lyon and his NICHD colleagues have published more than 26 books and 2,000 articles (mostly in refereed journals) in their quest to discover why some children read with ease and others do not. They have launched clinical trials involving almost 5,900 children in 10 cities to determine which approaches work best for teaching children with reading problems (Lyon & Moats, 1997). This corpus represents only some of the research available to anyone who is sufficiently concerned to seek it out.

Emmitt is also concerned about the mandating of phonics instruction in the USA and in UK. It is intriguing that those

few teacher organisations opposing the Bill were not opposed to the mandating of the Whole Language philosophy in the past. Of course, not all teacher organisations are perturbed about the current turn of events. The Learning First Alliance (1998) calls on educators and policy makers to base educational decisions on evidence rather than ideology, and to provide all children with explicit, systematic instruction in phonics incorporating decodable text.

parents have been unwilling to accept a system that is sanguine about such a high failure rate

This Alliance comprises the following organisations: American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, American Association of School Administrators, American Federation of Teachers, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Council of Chief State School Officers, Education Commission of the States, National Association of Elementary School Principals, National Association of Secondary School Principals, National Association of State Boards of Education, National Education Association, National PTA, National School Boards Association.

The issue of the lamentable decline in California's ability to teach its children how to read was certainly a disaster for the credibility of Whole Language, the system made compulsory in that state in 1987. The mandating of Whole Language was strongly supported by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), a body now opposed to the Act. It is widely accepted that the scandalous problem was primarily due the inadequacy of instruction available to students during that time. Emmitt attempted to deflect the responsibility for this parlous state of affairs from issues of instructional quality to other non-educational variables, such as multicultural factors. Her explanation is consistent with the position adopted by Whole Language protagonists, Freppon and Dahl (1998)—who consider "Factors other than reading instruction ... are paramount in literacy learning" (p.248). However, in Lyon's testimony to the Senate Committee (1998) he points out that half of the children reading below the basic level in California were from the homes of parents who were college graduates.

"In fact, the children of college-educated parents in California scored lowest with respect to their national cohort. These data underscore the fact that reading failure is a serious problem and can not simply be attributed to poverty, immigration, or the learning of English as a second language."

California, under enormous pressure from parents in particular, has now rewritten its reading policy—which reads in part:

"Any early reading program must include the following instructional components: phonemic awareness; letter names and shapes; systematic, explicit phonics; spelling; vocabulary development; comprehension and higher-order thinking; and

appropriate instructional materials. (California Department of Education, 1996).

The rethinking of the impact of Whole Language upon students is not confined to California—Illinois, Texas, Ohio, and Arizona are also endeavouring to reverse the decline of student literacy in their states. Emmitt refers glowingly to Maine as an example of how successful a literature-based approach can be. How impressive are their results? In 1998, 27% of Year 4 students did not reach the Basic level in reading—that is, the students were unable to demonstrate even a basic understanding of age-appropriate books (The National Centre for Educational Statistics, 1998). For a philosophy that values above all the primacy of meaning, the outcome that more than one student in every four cannot obtain meaning from print is unlikely to be a cause for celebration for them or their parents.

We in Australia cannot afford to be insular or cavalier. The Victorian Government in its 1999–2000 Budget anticipates 20% of all Year 1 students will not learn to read under our current initial instruction and will require intensive additional assistance. It should be noted that, as it was in California, the Whole Language approach is the dominant model in Australia.

“... virtually all curriculum guidelines on primary school literacy teaching produced are based on this approach. ... Virtually all teachers have undertaken the inservice training course, Early Literacy Inservice Course (ELIC), which is also based on a Whole Language approach to learning and literacy” (p. 25). The Australian House of Representatives Enquiry “The Literacy Challenge” (1993)

It is interesting that in the USA and Great Britain it has been pressure from parents that has led to the widespread reform. While Emmitt may be comfortable, even enthusiastic, about a failure rate of one in four, parents have been unwilling to accept a system that is sanguine about such a high failure rate. Governments have acted largely because of parental pressure, not because of concern from the organisations responsible for the teaching of reading. In the USA, for example, the head of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) expressed his disdain for parental concerns and his wish for avoidance of community accountability thus:

“I advance the idea that schools, like religion and the press, need the protection of something like a Constitutional amendment to keep education free of interference in matters of materials, methods, and curriculum from the winds of political change and the passing hysterias of public opinion” (Blau, undated).

like other professions, teachers must be accountable to the population that they serve

Parents in the USA and Great Britain have not accepted this insulting attempt at insularity, and nor have their governments. The new understanding is that, like other professions, teachers must be accountable to the population that they serve. It is an attempt to avoid the potentially embarrassing spotlight of accountability that is at the heart of the objections to the policy changes taking place.

#### What is the proper role of research in developing reading policy?

The Whole Language philosophy has been relatively impervious to the results of research. Some Whole Language advocates assert that the research perspective itself is responsible for inappropriate teaching practices. Edelsky (1990) argued that: “... procedural rigour in research design is no more than a thinly disguised demand that Whole Language be translated into terms that fit a skills model of reading and a positivist model of research” (p. 10). This perspective is presumably endemic, and responsible for the dearth of quantitative research emanating from Whole Language supporters on the effectiveness of the approach (Klesius, Griffith, & Zielonka, 1991; Stahl, McKenna, & Pagnucco, 1994). Emmitt provides some evidence that this situation may be changing and, that Whole Language supporters have entered the field of quantitative research. That is a move to be applauded, and a more appropriate practice than the usual apologists’ attempts to disparage research—evident in the Allington and Woodside-Jiron (1997, 1998) papers, and echoed in Emmitt’s response. For a reply to the Allington and Woodside-Jiron papers, see from this author—P. Mathes and J. Torgesen, personal communication, 1999.

#### Empiricism and knowledge claims

Stanovich (1994) proposed that competing claims to knowledge (such as about models of teaching reading) should be evaluated according to three criteria. First, findings should be published in refereed journals. If research is to be useful it must be well designed, and able to justify its findings. When peer review is part of the process of research the well-known taunt “research can prove anything you want” becomes less credible. Poorly designed studies (or writer opinions unsupported by research) are rejected, sometimes to appear in un-refereed journals or books. Emmitt is clearly supportive of this notion, having dismissively (and incorrectly) attributed the foundations of the Reading Excellence Act to un-refereed sources. However, she also demonstrates an inconsistency in her favourable and extensive coverage of the un-refereed opinions expressed in books by NCTE supporters Power (1999, cited in Emmitt, 1999) and Taylor (1998, cited in Emmitt, 1999).

Stanovich continues by arguing that acting upon reported results should be delayed until such results have been replicated by independent researchers. One feels more

comfortable when research findings are repeated in studies where the researchers have no particular stake in the outcome. For example, the Dahl and Freppon (1995) study investigated the relative progress of 48 children in four schools who received either one of skills based instruction or Whole Language instruction during their Prep and Year 1. They found that the quality of the Whole Language children's story writing was superior to that of children in the skills based programs; however, they found no difference between the children's knowledge of sound-letter correspondences at post-test. Thompson and Nicholson (1998) are critical of the study's design because of the failure to rule out alternative interpretations related to novelty effects favouring the Whole Language instruction. The risk of experimenter bias is difficult to avoid in research (especially when the experimenter(s) have a commitment to a model tested in a study), and it is largely for that reason that replications are considered necessary.

Third, there is a consensus within the appropriate research community about the reliability and validity of the various findings. This last criterion requires considerable reading across the field, but the frequency with which a particular study is cited, and accepted as legitimate, in journal articles provides one measure. Although the use of these criteria cannot guarantee infallibility it does offer reasonable consumer protection against spurious claims to knowledge.

While Stanovich's litmus test is appealing to empiricists, it is unlikely to impress those of the Whole Language perspective. Taylor (1998, cited in Emmitt, 1999) displays either a remarkable lack of understanding of the fundamental principles of research, or a capacity for mischief. Her accusations about researchers' motivation and alleged unscientific practices are insulting and desperate. Emmitt offers approval of Taylor's position "a very detailed and scientific analysis ...", but what she offers are the unrefereed opinions of two Whole Language protagonists about the quality of research. For a rebuttal of Taylor's criticisms see Foorman et al.'s (1998) paper, or from this author B. R. Foorman, personal communication, 1999. Given the criticism Emmitt makes about a purported lack of refereed articles cited in my paper (there were 15), it is interesting that of the 18 references Emmitt has cited, only two of those supporting her position are refereed.

#### What research findings are likely influence policy?

The attempts to disparage the enormous bulk of evidence favouring instruction in phonemic awareness and letter-sound relationships is unlikely to discourage those who read research. Apart from objections from those Whole Language advocates, the research community consensus has been acknowledged by a range of national and state organisations. For example, the National Academy of Sciences report recommends that children learn to read

through explicit phonics instruction and by sounding out unfamiliar words, and that context and pictures should not be used to substitute for information provided by the letters in the word (National Academy of Sciences, 1998). Similar findings can be found in the National Education Authority (1998), the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority of Great Britain (Department for Education and Employment, 1998), and the bodies mentioned earlier (Child Development and Behavior Branch of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, and the American Federation of Teachers).

the Whole Language philosophy has been relatively impervious to the results of research

There is a plethora of research papers and international reports concerning the importance of phonemic awareness available for examination, but it is a topic beyond the scope of this paper (see Hempenstall, 1997 for a review). Emmitt has suggested that phonemic awareness may be simply an outcome of learning to read, and not a causal component. She indicates sources to support her view (Goswami & Bryant, 1990; Perfetti, Beck, Bell &

Hughes, 1987), but apparently misunderstands the positions presented in these two papers. Each of these researchers argue that a threshold level of phonological awareness is necessary for learning to read. Like most researchers, they consider that as reading develops so do levels of phonemic awareness—that is, the relationship is reciprocal.

Additionally, Emmitt cites the (unrefereed) Taylor (1998, cited in Emmitt, 1999) as discovering only a few studies supportive of phonemic awareness instruction. Taylor may benefit from reading more widely, for example: Ball & Blachman (1991); Blachman, Ball, Black, and Tangel (1994); Bradley and Bryant (1983); Byrne and Fielding-Barnsley (1989, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1995); Castle, Riach, and Nicholson (1994); Cornwall (1992); Cunningham (1990); Hatcher, Hulme and Ellis (1994); Hurford, Darrow, Edwards, Howerton, Mote, Schauf, and Coffey (1993); Iversen and Tunmer (1993); Lenchner, Gerber, and Routh (1990); Lie (1990); Lundberg, Frost, and Petersen (1988); McDonald and Cornwall (1995); Mann (1993); Mann, Tobin, and Wilson (1987); O'Connor, Jenkins, Leicester, and Slocum (1993); O'Connor, Notary-Syverson, and Vadasy (1996); Swanson & Ramalgia (1992); Tangel and Blachman 1992; Torgesen, Morgan, and Davis (1992); Torgesen, Wagner, Rashotte, Alexander, and Conway (1997); Vellutino and Scanlon (1987).

A change in literacy instruction is likely to eventuate in Australia, as in other countries, despite some dissension among educators. Conservative governments in Australia have demonstrated a strong interest in the establishment of state and national testing programs to identify how well the teaching profession is coping with the task of ensuring literacy for the students placed in their care. In addition, such governments have shown a distinct preparedness to examine the effectiveness of programs which compete for a scarce education dollar. It would be ironic, if in a time of decimation (in the true sense of the word) of the education

system in Australia, one positive outcome was a shift towards accountability of teaching approaches as objectively assessed by student-outcome rather than by consonance with vague philosophical tenets.

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# Foreign Correspondence

In this edition of *FinePrint*, we explore the issues surrounding the development of ALBE programmes in post-apartheid South Africa.



## Adult Basic Education in South Africa: a brief overview

by Michael Westcott and Dawn Daniels

The main issues facing adult literacy and basic education in South Africa are a high illiteracy rate brought about primarily by *apartheid* underdevelopment and a drying up of funding since the first democratic elections in 1994. The challenge facing providers contending with these constraints is to complete a re-structuring process aimed at formalising the Adult Education and Training system and increasing its delivery throughout the country on a mass scale.

The statistics on illiteracy speak for themselves. According to the 1996 population census figures, there are nearly 24 million adults between the ages of 16 and 65. Of these, just over 3 million adults have not received any formal education at all and 91/2 million do not have a General Education (here defined as Grade 9 or below). Converted to a percentage, this means that 54% of the adult population of South Africa are functionally illiterate, all except a handful of whom are black.

The illiteracy rate is highest in the rural areas of South Africa, particularly amongst rural women, who experienced the full force of apartheid neglect both in terms of inferior education policies and through effects of apartheid such as poverty which resulted in dropout rates from school. Their situation is compounded today by a severe lack of development resources as well as cultural attitudes which discriminate against women receiving an education.

A large proportion of the foreign funding which once supported the work of a thriving NGO sector dedicated to ABET provision before the 1994 elections, has since then been re-routed directly to government which, in turn, administers the money through bi-lateral agreements with the donor countries involved. The result has been devastating. Of the estimated 35,000 NGOs countrywide which were directly or indirectly involved in adult literacy in the mid 1990s, only about 3,000 are still in operation today. The complicated tender procedures necessary to access this donor funding through the government have proved to be too onerous for the smaller NGOs, which meant

that those who survived the initial financial crisis have found it hard to overcome this latest hurdle.

South Africans enjoy a progressive government policy which states that it is the constitutional right of all citizens—both adults and children—to receive at least ten years of compulsory schooling. However, the means of achieving this right for illiterate and semi-literate adults remains seriously in doubt as there are just not enough funds committed to the field to have any meaningful effect. Less than 1% of the Education budget goes into ABET provision, a figure that contrasts starkly with formal schooling, which receives 83% of the budget. The main source of government funding are Public Adult Learning Centres where learners can register for Adult Education classes. Here too, a shortage of funds has resulted in government-spearheaded training for centre managers to raise their own funds.

Offsetting this gloomy picture are ongoing efforts to formalise and ensure a high quality of provision in the Adult Basic Education and Training field. South Africa has recently established a National Qualifications Framework that is closely based on the New Zealand, Australian and Canadian models. All education and training in the country will be delivered in terms of this framework. Unit standards are being developed for adult learners and educators across all learning areas at all levels. The change to an outcomes-based education and training system has required a great deal of practitioner training, a process which will continue for the next few years. The adoption of national standards will mean that, for the first time, all South Africans will be measured against the same educational standards and will be issued with certificates that have equal value. In the apartheid system of education and training, different groups fell into different education departments. These departments were geographically and racially divided. What this meant was that black people were effectively blocked access to further studies as the knowledge, skills and certificates they obtained in South Africa were seen as inferior. The new National Qualifications Framework hopes to offer redress and access to education for all South Africans and create a nation that will develop a culture of learning and teaching.

Many adult South Africans have very well developed skills in their area of work. These workers, however, very often have little or no formal education. They may be totally illiterate and innumerate and yet hold responsible

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# Open Forum

We would like to see your response to the material appearing in *Fine Print*. See the back cover for contact details.

In the articles here, we have a look at the global teacher as Jill Gordon-Thomson describes her experience teaching in New Guinea; we get some feedback from the LERN conference held in Malaysia from Pat Bodsworth and Beth Marr; and we get a creative spin on literacy from Kevin Brophy.

## 'Grassroots' literacy in Papua New Guinea

In April 1999 I received an unexpected phone call from a friend (and ex-boss) who told me that the Adventist Development & Relief Agency (ADRA) was funding a residential in-service program for adult literacy tutors in Papua New Guinea and they were looking for someone to facilitate the workshops. He then said, 'So I thought of you, Jill.'

That phone call signalled the start of a hectic two months. The workshops were to be held in the week 13–19 June, which was a good time as it was during the university vacation; but end of semester assignments had to be marked before then, as well as preparations made for the trip to Papua New Guinea (PNG). There were emails to and from PNG to establish what was expected of me, if I wanted to go, and also if they wanted me, rather than someone else. At the same time, I was doing the necessary research into Papua New Guinea (about which I knew very little) and the latest developments in adult literacy (as I had been out of touch for four years). Southern Cross University (SCU) library was a useful resource for both areas and Robyn Hodge, Education officer at ARIS, was an enthusiastic and helpful contact for adult literacy.

The program was to include workshops on Adult Literacy, AIDS/HIV, Health and Small Business Management. I was engaged on a volunteer basis to facilitate the Adult Literacy workshops. I learnt that they would be held at a bush camp 14 miles outside Lae, with mountain-stream water piped to showers and 'long drop' toilets. I chose to stay at the camp with the participants, rather than in town, to be able to share and learn more. Preparations included taking necessary medical precautions and packing eating utensils and sleeping gear, as well as teaching/learning materials.

The participants would be 220 volunteer adult literacy tutors, including 12 'trainers' (one of whom was the coordinator for the Port Moresby area) from all over PNG. I learnt later that one couple had walked for three days to reach the nearest road, to obtain transport to the airport at Port Moresby and then fly to Lae. Although most of the participants were Seventh Day Adventists, many (including

me) were not. I was told that some (or even most) of them spoke little or no English and that their education levels ranged from Grade 4 to Grade 10. People from rural areas, with little or no formal education or twentieth century facilities such as electricity, are known in Pidgin as 'grassroots'—hence the title of this paper. The language of the textbook used for the literacy program was Pidgin, which had been chosen as the most widely used lingua franca. Mother tongue education (and textbooks) is out of the question in a country whose inhabitants speak an estimated 850 different languages.

I prepared a set of handouts in plain English, based on my own work and resources from the SCU library and ARIS. (I found that much of the more recent material was less relevant to the learning environment in PNG than that written some years ago.) Enough space was left on the handouts for participants to write translations from English into their own language or into Pidgin. There were 23 handouts and 220 photocopies of each had to be made at the ADRA office in Lae. Luckily the staff managed to keep up so that I never ran out.

The program had events planned for each day from 7.30 am to 9 pm, with a break for breakfast from 9.30 to 10.30 am, for 'refreshments' from 12.30 to 1.00 pm and for dinner from 5 to 6.30 pm. I was responsible for two or three sessions on each of the first 5 days. The sixth day was reserved for religious and social activities and we all left on the seventh day.

Workshops took place in a marquee and groups also spread out outside under the trees when it was not raining. (When there was a tropical downpour drumming on the marquee I needed to use every decibel of what my friends call my 'carrying English voice' to make myself heard.) Each participant had a plastic chair, an exercise book and writing materials. There was a whiteboard and textas and a table on which to place materials. On the third day we had butcher's paper. I was given a 'translator' who stood (or sat) by my side to translate what I said into Pidgin and I found that by the end of the second day I was able to pick up when my translator did not convey the meaning I wanted.

The program started with an introduction and the participants were very impressed that I was a university tutor who was now going to share some of my knowledge

and experience with them. I stressed the fact that this would be a learning experience for all of us and so we must all share with one another.

The program overview was followed by group work. Participants were told to gather in groups in different parts of the marquee, according to the different areas/regions/provinces they came from. 7 groups formed, the largest being from Port Moresby and vicinity. They were then numbered off from 1–7 to form 7 groups incorporating people from all the different regions. They were then asked to identify the no.1 problem for their group which were:

- Group 1 Teacher and learner eyesight
- Group 2 Financial problem
- Group 3 No proper place (for teaching)
- Group 4 Language problems
- Group 5 Materials—books, boards etc
- Group 6 Judging qualities of teaching
- Group 7 Materials

This was not typical of a list one would expect from adult literacy tutors in Australia!

The participants were told they would be asked to find solutions to these problems later in the program after we had shared some information. Each day the groups were reformed to mix people up even more and to encourage information sharing. After everyone had arrived (by Day 2), 12 groups were formed.

The participants would gather in their groups, either in the marquee or under the trees, for discussion and then return to the marquee to share the results. Handouts would be given out either before the group work, as a basis for discussion, or afterwards, to add to the information participants had gathered.

On Day 2 Problem-solving and Brain-storming were explained and steps for brain-storming listed for them to follow in their group work.

On Day 3 there was a review of the previous 2 days, followed by an unplanned presentation: 'The history of English' which was as a result of informal conversations with a group of participants the previous evening when they were referring disparagingly to Pidgin as 'broken English' and a 'low status' language. The aim was to show that the English language is in fact a Pidgin that formed as a result of the intermingling of different languages and that English people are also a mixture. I gave examples of words of Latin, French, Germanic and Norse origin and described my blonde-haired, blue-eyed 'Saxon' mother, my dark-haired, dark-eyed 'Celtic' father and my 'Viking' red (now grey) hair and greenish eyes. Many people came up to me later to say how much this had interested and surprised them, as they had always thought that English was a 'pure' language and the English a 'pure' race.

Day 3 also had group brain-storming of solutions to the 6 problems identified on Day 1, which demonstrated remarkable creativity, ingenuity and lateral thinking.

On Day 4 in the evening we had a Debate organised by the Social Committee: Learning is the Learner's Responsibility, which was highly successful.

The final session on Day 5 was Evaluation and that night there was an amazing farewell concert with hilarious comedy sketches and beautiful singing.

I was taken on a drive round Lae and the surrounding area in the afternoon of Day 6. Then on Day 7, before dawn, I was whisked off to the airport to return to Australia and another life in a different culture, after one of the most rewarding mutual learning experiences I have ever known.

Jill Gordon-Thomson now works as a part-time tutor at Southern Cross University in the School of Social and Workplace Development. She is also researching the construction of Aboriginal identity in texts written by indigenous and non-indigenous Australians for her PhD.

## Learning in Penang, September 1999—the sixth international Literacy and Education Research Network conference on learning

Held every two years, this was the tenth anniversary of the international Literacy and Education Research Network (LERN) conference and the first one to be held outside Australia. Co-hosting the conference was the Universiti Sains Malaysia, the Centre for Workplace Communication and Culture and RMIT University. Five hundred people from over 20 countries attended and more than 150 presentations were made.

Keynote speakers James Gee and Gunther Kress were a highlight of the conference—both casting doubts on the 'back to basics' push in education. Both pointed out that the power in a society driven by communication and information technology resides with those with high level skills in a range of literacies centred around computer systems, design and graphic communication. In fact Gee presented a convincing argument that governments pushing basic literacy skills as paramount concerns were playing into the hands of the New Capitalists and were ensuring a generation of low order workers. Kress demonstrated the changing appearance of text over several decades and the way in which the strength of the message was increasingly communicated by headlines, graphics and placement of text rather than simply through

the written word. In a similar vein another interesting plenary session previewed the new multi-literacies video—a product of action research conducted by teachers in their school classrooms using the multi-literacies framework.

Participants were diverse, including teachers from South African Technicons, Malaysian primary schools, Australian TAFE institutes, and academics from all over the world, including what appeared to be at least one jumbo jet full from RMIT University. Hundreds of teachers from Malaysian schools were sponsored by their Government. This mix of participants resulted in a diversity of needs and interests not always met by the conference, but also emphasised the different priorities of education around the globe. While Australian academics discussed their latest advances in online learning and the new technologies it was pointed out that 70% of the world's population was yet to make a telephone call.

The presence of a large group of South African educators evoked an emotional response—what an exciting time for them developing a whole new adult education system.

Penang's Batu Ferringhi is a fabulous place for a conference: tropical weather, fantastic food, beachside hotels and time to shop. The Malaysians were great hosts providing conference participants with a host of cultural experiences including performances by children from local schools, and visits to local Indian, Malaysian and Chinese schools.

**Pat Bodsworth is in the Arts & Preparatory Department (TAFE) at Victoria University. Beth Marr is in the Faculty of Education, Language and Community Services at RMIT University.**

## Literacy: what is it for?

In the early 1980s I began reading the spiritual teachings of a man named Gurdjieff. Katherine Mansfield had been one of his followers and had died at his school in Fontainebleau near Paris in 1923. Gurdjieff called his method of enlightenment the Fourth Way. The first three ways are those of the fakir who learns through the perfection of the moving body, the yogi who perfects the intellect, and the monk who struggles with worldly emotions in pursuit of a higher state. Each of these ways require complete obedience to an authority and withdrawal from the world. The fourth way did not require these sorts of extremes. The methods of the fourth way aimed to work on all three aspects of the self—the physical, intellectual and emotional—at once. In addition it was a way that involved an understanding of one's individual psychology. Self-understanding rather than obedience was important. I joined a group in Melbourne led by a man who had been taught by one of Gurdjieff's own pupils. The teaching involved learning intricate Eastern dances, certain meditation techniques and participating in

discussions and lectures that were focused on an understanding of the personality. I used to cycle from Brunswick across the city to Prahran for our meetings once a week. I was mostly drawn to the dances. They required memory for long series of actions, timing, and most interesting of all, the trailling of the body to make two or three different and precise movements at once. When a dance was finally learned, when all its parts were put together after being slowly built from its simplest movements, there was a particularly wonderful and powerful experience of concentration-without-thought. I expect musicians, some athletes, pilots and many others who perform complex physical routines would recognise this experience. Our leader who was near-perfect in his execution of the dances, watched us reveal our personalities as we struggled to concentrate and learn. He would give us talks about self-awareness and self-development.

Then, I think about six months into the life of this particular group, the leader conducted individual interviews with us. When it was my turn to talk with him he took me to a room away from the movement practice and asked me what I most liked to do in life. I told him I was a writer and that reading had always been important to me. He said, 'Yes, you can escape from the world and from yourself by reading a book.' I heard what he was saying and I understood that for him reading was not important, or at least it was not crucial in the way it was for me. I heard in his remark too the Implied promise that he would cure me of this escapism.

Things changed for me after that. I continued to attend the groups, read all I could about Gurdjieff, performed the dances (sometimes in public), went away with the group for weekends and listened to the lectures of our leader for about another year and a half. But the Fourth Way did not become my way. I went back to writing, back to my books, as if they had my destiny all along.

This spiritual leader was literate. In fact while our group was together he wrote a book which we helped to proofread. My name appears on the acknowledgement page of his book. But he was not one of those people who must walk across a room to read titles on the spines of books wherever there is a bookcase. He was literate but he did not love literacy as I did.

Though I had resisted his attitude, and eventually rejected his method of enlightenment, this man was partly right about the escapism. Reading had always been my childhood escape from a family of eight bawling siblings and two frazzled parents, from the demands of school work and the possibilities for embarrassment out there in the streets or at the local dance hall. But reading was always more than that. And anyone who has fallen in love with books will know what that more is. Books had been my true teachers, my most demanding friends, my most shocking journeys. In 1904 Franz Kafka wrote to his friend Oskar Pollak,

Altogether I think we ought to read only books that bite and sting us. If the book we are reading doesn't shake us awake like a blow on the skull, why bother reading it in the first place? So that it can make us happy, as you put it? Good God, we'd be just as happy if we had no books at all; books that make us happy we could, in a pinch, also write ourselves. What we need are books that hit us like a most painful misfortune, like the death of someone we love more than we love ourselves, that make us feel as though we had been banished to the woods, far from any human presence, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us. That is what I believe.

Perhaps we are not truly literate until we can reply to Kafka: Yes, that is the kind of reading I crave too! Kafka is not asking for books that are dark and unforgiving, but for books of a certain dimension and ambition. Devastating as it is, Kafka's most famous story, *Metamorphosis*, can be enjoyed as a very funny tale. To be bitten and stung by a story is to be dragged out of our routine selves into a strange sort of enlightened confusion.

In this version of literacy there is no justification for it. It becomes an obsession. It is irresistible. It needs no justification.

There is another story I want to link to the idea of literacy. In 1890 a medieval manuscript anthology was discovered in an archive in a sealed storage room at the back of a synagogue in Old Cairo. This manuscript held 10,000 different texts. Because of the Jewish reverence for the name of God, no paper had been thrown away by this collector for fear that it might bear His name. In the discovered anthology there were marriage contracts, grocery lists, love poems and booksellers' catalogues. Anything and everything.

This story of the anthology attracts me because it reminds me that literacy makes the archive possible. Literacy is an archive. An archive preserves what would otherwise be lost. Words can now be kept for hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of years. A trace of language. Traces of lost languages, lost technologies. Evidence and instruction. A code. Many codes. When a word is written on a piece of paper something happens. A movement in time has left a trace. A thought that has gone has left a record of its presence. Evidence and information.

I do not want to claim that this process is free of atrocities, or that it is somehow sacred. Literacy, like the computer, is not in itself a cause for celebration, or a phenomenon to be protected at all costs. It is no more than an opportunity. An aid. It is a prosthesis. Kafka's small hymn to reading quoted above is really a call for a particular kind of literature and a particular kind of reader. For him it was only the literature that wields an axe, only the reader who puts a neck on the

block of the book, that justifies literacy. His was a plea for a certain kind of literacy.

In 1927 Sigmund Freud wrote that man had become a kind of prosthetic God (in *Civilisation and Its Discontents*). His point is even more emphatic in 1999. Each day, thanks to technology, we can strap ourselves into or strap on our wrist watches, our laptops, our cars, our spectacles, our mobile phones, home alarms, email and web connections, and plane flights. When all this works we become prosthetic gods. Language and literacy are prosthetic aids too. They might be biologically wired-in these days, but from the evidence of the apes we can see that survival, happiness, complex social interaction and a degree of culture are all possible without this tool. Strap it on, or better still, wire it in, and we begin to approximate some ideal of perfection. Like all tools it can be a weapon against knowledge or a source of that pleasure and dismay so crucial to enlightenment.

One of literacy's most wonderful and poetic uses is in the creation of archives. I think of poems as archives. They capture and preserve for us the voice of a person, of a time, of a movement; they are eclectic, anarchic, unpredictable repositories of the details of living, the details of the mind, the impossible, the silly, the useless and the trivial. But I believe it is there in poems that future readers will find what it was really like to be alive in 1999. Perhaps the discovered anthology in Old Cairo is one epic poem.

To teach a child enough for them to write a shopping list, or send a birthday message, or jot down a thought before it escapes too far into the past, to pass on a cheeky joke in class: all this goes into the vast, anarchic archive-of-the-literate.

There are tensions between the order required by literacy and its institutions (schools, publishing houses, journals, universities) and our desire for the unpredictable, the shocking, the reactive and inventive. I was interested in a story I heard recently about a six year old boy who wrote 'Fuck you' on the wall at school. His father's first worried reaction was who the message might have been directed at: was it directed at his teacher, another child, the principal—was it directed at the boy's father? After helping the boy rub it off the next morning, and witnessing his fear that others would see it and know he had written it, the father's heart went out to his child. Perhaps the important point about the boy's act was that that week he had been doing -ck words in class and had been careful enough to remember his lesson in literacy as he drove an axe into one particular frozen sea.

**Dr Kevin Brophy: author of six books of fiction and poetry, and teacher of creative writing at the Victorian College of the Arts. This talk was delivered at the Victorian Writers Centre on Literacy Day 1999. His latest book is *Creativity* (Melbourne University Press, 1998)**

# Policy Update

We reproduce here a slightly edited version of VALBEC's guide to good practice in adult language, literacy and numeracy assessment for ACE providers—commissioned in 1998 by the Adult Community and Further Education Board.

## Assessment Practice in Adult Language, Literacy and Numeracy

### Introduction

#### Some definitions

For the purposes of this Guide we will regard assessment as the making of judgements (by the assessor as teacher, tutor or trainer) about the performance of an adult learner (the student in the adult language, literacy and numeracy program). The judgements that are made might occur at any point in the continuum of the adult learner's contact with the learning provision: before entry to the provision, during the provision or at the end of the provision (Falk 1996, p 38). The judgements made at these points are often referred to as initial, formative and summative assessment.

#### The need for professional accountability

Judgements made about learners and their progress are now assuming high stakes for the learner and the professional reputation of the provider. Such information provides the basis for eligibility to further education and training. Registered Training Organisations (RTO) or providers also need to develop a sound reputation for fair and valid assessments to operate effectively in a competitive environment. This environment includes multiple funding arrangements from state and commonwealth sources with idiosyncratic reporting requirements and increasing prominence of external audit and verification processes. RTOs, be they large or small, community, institute or enterprise based, are required to manage a volunteer, casual or part time workforce as well as manage complex reporting and statistical returns for their funding. This means that assessment and reporting practice needs to be formally documented for both internal communication and for ensuring quality assurance within the system.

It is important that practitioners develop assessment tasks and assessment events that can be documented and supported as being 'to a standard'. That is, the competency based outcome statement properly describes the literacy and numeracy skills and knowledge being developed and is comparable to that of another learner developed in a different setting.

#### Assessment practices for different purposes

In this kaleidoscopic environment, how assessors/teachers in the community sector marry their experiences based on long association and teaching practice in the literacy field and gut-felt assessments of the past, to new and ever changing competency based requirements is a challenge. Practitioners need to develop a range of assessment practices for a variety of purposes. For example, initial or placement assessment is diagnostic in nature and quite different from the formative assessment traditionally used by teachers to monitor what is taught and learnt. It is different, too, from forms of summative assessment used for post course assessment and final reports.

#### Initial assessment

Adults come to language, literacy and numeracy programs when they want to improve their communication in English. More frequently they are being referred to Training Organisations for training to meet a 'mutual obligation' or to gain skills related to gaining employment. The assessor must judge the kinds of reading and writing tasks (or different types of literacies) that the person can already perform, and the literacies they might want to perform at some time in the future and for some particular reason (Falk 1996). The assessor is also being asked to make some predictive judgement about how the person will progress through the curricula being offered, how quickly and what additional support may be required. The assessor is being asked to recommend on the suitability of a programme and confirm eligibility.

A teacher trained or experienced in the field of adult language, literacy and numeracy should do the assessment. Because of consolidation of human resources in the field RTOs should not be forced into the position that allows just any person to conduct assessments. Trained, experienced staff should conduct interviews and assessments.

#### The interview

The interview is the most common form of initial assessment used in adult language, literacy and numeracy education. The interview provides an opportunity for the learner to articulate their goals, provide some self assessment of their skills and provide information about their background which might impact on their future learning. It is not and should not be viewed as a test. The assessor is gauging if the learner is eligible or suitable for a range of programs available either with them or for referral to another provider. The professional judgement of the assessor will need to be sustainable; that is, evidence needs to be kept to support those judgements. An explicit set of protocols around the interview, self-assessment and judgements based on specific assessment tasks need to be in place.

#### Setting up the interview

Referrals come from a variety of sources, and appointments are made in a variety of ways—through centre administrative staff, through Centrelink staff, or through the

assessor. Assessment can occur in any location. In any case, the learner's comfort and needs should be of the highest concern. Comfort, confidentiality, and recognition of student needs should be foremost in dictating the venue. Informality should rule. It is essential to do as much as possible to put the learner at ease. Prospective students may wish to invite someone to accompany them as support during the process. It is important that the assessor elicit as much information as possible from the learner rather than relying on the support person to answer for the learner. The learner may or may not have had prior contact with the organisation conducting the assessment.

The length of assessment time varies widely among assessors but usually lasts about an hour. It should be realised that the longer the interview the more difficulties the learner will have in concentrating. In longer interviews, the learner may need time out to have a cigarette, a drink, visit amenities, or move around the premises. Again, the assessor must be very aware of the needs of the learner.

#### **Confidentiality requirements**

Because assessment results should be available to the learner as well as some government agencies and classroom teachers, a written record should be kept. The assessor can assist the transfer of information by taking notes during the assessment on a predetermined proforma, or by directly transferring information after the interview/assessment in some standard format. Learners should sign a statement allowing release of information to Centrelink or other agencies. Confidentiality of information should be guaranteed. Records should be kept in a place that allows only the assessor or classroom teachers access. Records should not be removed from the centre premises. Classroom teachers can be appraised of the assessment interview by having the results available to them, by briefing, or by any means that best acquaints the teacher with the information gathered. Records should reflect the National Reporting System (NRS) and/or the Certificates of General Education for Adults (CGEA) competencies, depending on the nature of the assessment.

#### **Assessment tasks in the interview**

During the interview, the assessor can determine the oral proficiency of the learner through answers to the interview questions asked by the assessor. Generally speaking the assessor gets a view about where the learner sits in relation to their programs but wants to check their professional hunch by asking the learner to complete some assessment tasks that may check out one or more macro skills. The content of reading, writing, and numeracy assessment tasks should be reflective of those questions, and should be based in a familiar context. Authentic, everyday materials should be included in the assessment tasks. During reading assessment, learners may read aloud or silently, answer comprehension questions orally or in writing. Numeracy may relate to articles read or have no relationship to the reading text. Again, learner comfort with materials and willingness to participate in various tasks should be considered. The specific assessment

tasks should be available in a kit so the assessor has consistency in assessment and a variety of tasks to choose from to best indicate the level of learner proficiency. Suggestions for specific reading, writing, numeracy and oral communications tasks are available by referring to the attached bibliography.

#### **Feedback to the learner**

Once the assessment has taken place, the learner should be given a report of the assessment and be given the options of classes available for their study: subjects times and venues. The learner may wish to know the class size, general student profile of the class, ie. general age of other students, if there are students with a disability attending. This specific information concerning classes should be given to the learner. The assessor needs to ensure the learner feels comfortable entering the courses suggested.

Sometimes a lack of human resources dictates that the learner is placed in a group and the teacher assesses during class time. This can be accomplished with discretion and integrity if the teacher has experience in the field. In fact, more in-depth formative assessment may need to be done during class time by the classroom teacher following initial assessment interview to develop a more comprehensive view about the learner's needs and goals.

#### **Recording and reporting initial assessment**

It is recommended that the assessor maintain the following records:

- General information about the learner including contact details and referral details (if any).
- A report on the assessment including a cover sheet(s) describing the features and conditions of the assessment task(s) and any samples of the learner's performance and evidence of the judgement made by the assessor. Any other notes that might impact on the learner such as special needs should also be made.

This report should be provided to the teacher to inform the curriculum.

This information can be transferred to the official forms required by the various funding agencies for enrolment.

The assessment cover sheet with attached material provides a basis for moderating assessment tasks against the reporting standard being used (For example either the CGEA or NRS), covers OTFE and ACFE audit requirements and verification documents for the Literacy and Numeracy Programme.

#### **Formative assessment**

Most assessment in language, literacy and numeracy is formative assessment. That is, as the teacher, tutor or trainer works with the adult learner certain judgements must be made on an ongoing basis. For example, the student needs confirmation that their work is on the 'right track'. They ask

for assistance when they do not know which of the answers is the 'right one'. They want the work they have finished at home to be 'corrected'. The learner responds to teacher questions while doing group work and the teacher evaluates (judges or assesses) whether or not their answer is 'OK', then asks other questions which the teacher again, and rapidly, assess and moves on.

The same can be said for the comments provided on several drafts of a written text. The teacher provides feedback by way of questions or written comments leading the student to edit the text for meaning or greater approximation to a genre type or standard use of grammar.

The teacher, tutor or trainer constantly modifies these activities to facilitate learning and to provide opportunities to practice new skills or transfer from familiar contexts to new ones. Expectations of the teacher and the goals of the learner are constantly modified through formative assessment and feedback to the learner.

A clear distinction, however, needs to be made about the assessment and the reporting of the assessment and about the development of learning tasks and activities and assessment tasks and activities.

#### Competency based assessment

Assessment in a competency based system requires some formal statement that the learner 'can do' something within a specified set of conditions. It generally requires the assessment of a task in a specific context to be described against a generic description of knowledge or skill formulated in a 'competency standard' or 'learning outcome' statement. Assessment in a competency based system therefore requires a level of formality that is not provided by formative assessment. Given the high stakes of assessment it is only fair that the learner is aware of when they are being assessed and what is being assessed. It is not sufficient for 'formative' judgements made by teacher, tutors or trainers on the basis of completion of activities designed for learning to be used for an assessment of competence.

The accumulation of information or evidence from formative assessment can be collected and structured by using particular techniques. These are described, among others, in the next section on summative assessment.

#### Summative assessment

When the course or a particular sequence of teaching is over the teacher, tutor or trainer often has a reason to assess the adult learner's progress. For example, providers need to be able to demonstrate to auditors and verifiers the relationship of what has been taught (curriculum) to assessments and that progress is being made. Typically, judgements will be made because information is required about which skills or knowledge the learner has recently acquired—what they can do and what they know. Has progress been made on the development of specific

competencies? It might be that the teacher has to judge whether the learner is able to 'handle' the work required in a new course they wish to progress to or a job for which they are applying. The assessment might be part of a progress report to a funding agency and the trigger to release funds.

#### Choosing an appropriate method

When choosing an appropriate methodology for assessment you should ensure that the method meets the principles of good assessment.

Assessment of learning outcomes in the CGEA should be based on the following principles:

- Assessment tasks/activities should be grounded in a relevant context and should be not be culturally biased.
- Students should be assessed across as wide a range of tasks/activities as possible, in order to increase reliability and validity of assessment. One off tasks/activities do not provide a reliable and valid measure of competence.
- Instructions for assessment tasks should be clear, explicit and ordered. Students must know what is expected and the criteria by which they will be judged.
- Time allowed to complete a task should be reasonable and specified, and should allow for preparation and re-drafting as appropriate to the activity. Some assessment task/activities will need to take place over a number of weeks.
- Assessment tasks/activities should be open ended and flexible enough for students to show competence at different levels

CGEA , pp14–15

Judgements made in summative assessment might be based on a post course assessment using a single 'test' or series of assessment tasks developed to replicate the activities of the course and to allow learners to demonstrate skills explicitly taught.

It might take the form of a summary of the formative assessments undertaken during the course. This will require more complex record keeping and a commitment to a methodology for systematically recording evidence. In this situation, assessment events or processes need to be explicitly planned for within the sequence of activities for a course. In this way assessments conducted for summative purposes can meet the principles outlined in the CGEA, which are reproduced above.

#### Good practice

There is a temptation in competency based curricula such as the CGEA to segment the teaching of reading, writing,

oral communication, numeracy and general curriculum options. It is tempting, too, to develop assessment tasks to correspond directly to individual learning outcomes, however, constructing curriculum and assessment tasks in this way divorces the learning from realistic social context of language use and is not considered good practice.

Best practice is to develop learning activities around themes of interest to the participants and construct assessment tasks that take a holistic view of social activity which is representative of interactive and realistic communication. Assessment tasks should be developed that allow the possibility for the learner to demonstrate a number of learning outcomes in a socially realistic way.

The two assessment approaches outlined below meet the CGEA assessment principles and are consistent with good practice in language literacy and numeracy education.

#### Assessment events

At the end of a unit of work or a sequence of activities it may be appropriate to set a formal assessment task(s) that provides an open ended opportunity for the learner to demonstrate what they have learned and to transfer its application to a new context. While the activity may replicate activities conducted during the course it is explicitly being used to assess a performance under specific performance conditions including the extent of support, time limits and number of attempts can documented. The methods of assessment are generally well covered in the CGEA but frequently implicit in any assessment records. Using an Assessment Task Cover Sheet enables you to document details of the methods or context of assessment, the instructional context, the conditions of performance and performance criteria being used. All this information is needed when assessment is viewed by an external agency for moderation, verification or audit.

The post course report from this form of assessment might include a statement of attainment for each of the modules covered or Records of Achievement (such as samples provided in the CGEA Record Keeping Kit ) with attached Assessment Task Cover Sheets for all assessments done during these formal assessment events.

#### Portfolio assessment

Portfolio assessment is frequently used in adult language, literacy and numeracy in Australia but is not well understood. It is not a folder of work collected from the learner by the teacher. It is a systematic self-assessment process negotiated between the learner and the assessor over a course. This approach has been used extensively within adult literacy programs in the United States and a methodology for including it as part of the curriculum planning published by Hanna Fingeret. (1993)

A portfolio is a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the student's efforts, progress and achievements in one of more areas. The collection must include student participation in selecting contents, the criteria for selection, the criteria for judging merit, and evidence of student reflection

Paulson and Meyer

Portfolio assessment can be used to formalise formative assessment. Both learner and teacher can collect the pieces of work undertaken as learning activities with annotations. The learner and teacher will need to meet and discuss the assessment criteria and on the basis of that select representative pieces for the Portfolio. In this way the criteria is explicit and the learner has input to the decision making process. An Assessment Task Cover Sheet would capture this information.

A Portfolio, for example, could capture the components of a project. As well as the finished or published work, the drafts, notes and other pieces produced in its development could also be assessed.

This whole approach has to be introduced to the learner as an explicit part of the curriculum. In competency based curricula the criteria and conditions of performance are already determined but the approach encourages explicit discussion of these criteria with the learner. Fingeret suggest the following steps:

#### Plan portfolio assessment:

- decide on a schedule for developing portfolios;
- decide on criteria for choosing material to move from folders to portfolios (CGEA Learning Outcomes or NRS Indicators of Competence); and
- develop criteria and process for assessing portfolios.

#### Implement portfolio assessment:

- introduce the concept to your students at the beginning of the instruction;
- create folders and journals: ways to capture the process and products of learning;
- develop criteria for moving material from folders to portfolios;
- move material from folders to portfolios; and
- assess the portfolios.

#### The final report

The RTO should retain a full learner file. This will include the Assessment Task Cover Sheets from all assessment events conducted during the course with accompanying samples or a copy of the Portfolio. This can be used to draw information for other reports such as to the learner, an employer, or funding agency.

Other reports may summarise the information in specified ways: For example, completion data for OTFE needs to be AVETMISS compliant. DETYA have reporting proformas and standards for the WELL and Literacy and Numeracy Programme.

### References (Annotated)

Falk, I. *Comparison and Evaluation of Adult Literacy Assessment Practices*, 1996, p 38

Fingeret, H. 1993 *It belongs to me: a guide to portfolio assessment in adult education programs*, US Department of Education,

Fitzpatrick, L., Wignall, L., & McKenna, R., *Assessment and Placement Resources for the Literacy and Numeracy Programme—developing pre-training assessments using the National Reporting System*, DETYA, 1999. This resource is useful if you are developing your own initial interview and assessment tasks related to the NRS. It also provides some assessment tasks and some proformas, such as the Sample Cover Sheet for

documenting assessment. Written specifically for the Commonwealth funded Literacy and Numeracy Programme but has ideas that could be generally useful

<http://wdb.vu.edu.au/abe/cgeamod/home.html>

This site provides opportunities for teachers to moderate tasks on line. There is information about assessment practice, principles and relationship with the NRS

<http://www.nrs.detya.gov.au>

This site provides a complete version of the NRS with some updated Sample Activities. It also provides information about how to use the resources for assessment as well as practical case studies of the NRS in use in a variety of settings. The section Using the NRS takes you through assessment processes.

Lyons, S. 1994 *An Assessment Guide for Adult Basic Education Programs in Victoria, incorporating the Certificates of General Education for Adults*, ACFE. This resource provides examples of assessment tasks related specifically to the CGEA and is still very relevant.

### ... continued from p18

right throughout the document. So the document is not an entity, it's a series of impulses sent to the screen constantly refreshed constantly changeable and increasing generalised ... or using something like outline view or page layout view, different ways in which you can shift time. If your working on a paper—based text you have your notes, you type it, you draft it all the way through. Increasingly you can change time online, and you can get different perspectives—zoom and things like that.

And metaphors like zoom come from different meaning systems—to do with film or photography—fascinating for language literacy teachers—fascinating because we are seeing grammars from different systems and we are following them—and to reflect on those is just fascinating, it's really exciting.

### There's another article there Chris. Thanks for your time and insights.

Chris Corbel is Manager of the Computer Literacy Centre at AMES Victoria. He has 20 years experience in language teaching, teacher training and curriculum design. He taught CALL at Master's level at the University of Melbourne for six years.

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supervisory positions in the workplace. Even workers in essential services such as the police force have low levels of literacy and numeracy. Recent figures show that as many as 30,000 police personnel out of a total force of 127,000 are functionally illiterate, yet they manage to carry out their basic policing duties effectively. With the new curriculum framework, these adults will be given credits for the knowledge and skills that they already have. We are currently working on mechanisms for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL—often referred to as APL or Accreditation of Prior Learning—in other countries). In terms of our Multi-year Implementation Plan for Adult Basic Education and Training, these adults will have access to the education components that would make up a national certificate. Access to education is to be provided by the state, business, community based organisations and NGOs. If all of these sectors work together, we are confident that we can begin to break the back of illiteracy in this country, despite the formidable obstacles in the way.

# Beside the whiteboard

**Cathryn Collins is an ESL and literacy tutor and Brunswick Neighbourhood House and Preston Reservoir Adult Community Education. She has worked in the field since 1994 and despite the negativity of some of these answers, enjoys her job immensely.**

## **What are you doing now and how did you arrive at this point in your career?**

I'm teaching ESL and literacy in a neighbourhood house. I've taught in a lot of different places, from Reservoir to Sunshine, in TAFE and ELICOS, various community centres and overseas. I've seen more of Melbourne since I've been teaching than I ever thought I'd see! Going back to study and doing a Dip Ed. was a personal challenge, I decided to go into language and literacy teaching as I was sick of office politics and disillusioned with working in the private sector.

## **How would you describe your students?**

I've got students from Bosnia, Indonesia, China, Spain, Japan, Malta and Korea. They range in age from 22 to 75. They're here for all sorts of reasons: study, work, political. They're mostly women and their educational backgrounds are wildly different. There are doctors and teachers and scientists, housewives and retired people—they're an amazing mix of personality, age, culture, religion, ability and experience.

## **What do you see as your personal challenges in your work?**

That diversity can be a challenge and being a sessional teacher—not feeling connected to the workplace and always rushing around. I don't have time for meetings or professional development. When I worked five days a week, it was great to have the support of other teachers. Working in the community sector—resources, room and time are hard to come by. Money's an issue and there's nowhere at work to prepare or do administrative stuff. I only see my colleagues on the way out or in, depending on who's coming or going and it's hard to keep track of that at times! It's a challenge to deal with everybody's different needs—people come for all sorts of reasons so you end up being counsellor, teacher, childcare worker and social secretary. I also enjoy that part of my job.

## **What and/or who have been some of the key influences on your teaching?**

I've been influenced mainly by where I've worked and who I've worked with. When I started teaching, the classes were geared towards empowering the students with the skills and confidence to access their community. Most of my ideas for classes come from the students, their needs and from teachers I've worked with. The great thing about having worked in so many different places is the variety of teaching styles I've had the opportunity to observe and hear about. Moving around has also influenced my attitude to the job, it's made me flexible and adaptable. I also think my experiences as a foreign language learner and traveller have influenced the way I approach teaching. I know how vital language is to maintaining a sense of self.

## **What do you see as the key issues facing the Language & Literacy field?**

I think the disenchantment felt by some of the teachers I've met in the past couple of years, is an issue. Many of the people I've worked with feel let down by a system that doesn't recognise and support their skills and I think that has to have an effect on their teaching practice. The lack of funding for programs means that students aren't able to get the support they need to progress and teachers feel the stress of not knowing whether their classes will be refunded which necessarily must affect the way they feel about their classes.

## **What role do you think VALBEC should play?**

Communicating these issues back to the funding bodies and state politicians, in other words, lobbying.