fine print magazine

valbec

contents

page

features

regulars

Editorial

The recent VALBEC conference opened with a passionate and inspiring address from Nic Frances, of the Brotherhood of St Laurence. In describing his experiences in education and his work with the Brotherhood, Nic brought us to an awareness of how our connectedness to each other is often lost through the mask of professional identity, grinding bureaucratic process or simply through adherence to empty social convention. Nic raised the emotional temperature of the room with a plea for us to see one another with honesty and to honour the 'light that shines within us all'.

Had Nic been able to stay for the day, he would have experienced a conference alive to its theme, 'Make Connections'. The day unfolded with three groups of workshops, which allowed participants a wide range of opportunities to make connections at many different levels. Developments in research, new perceptions on practice, and shifts in funding and policy were shared and discussed, fostering a strong sense of professional community. Those of us who have been through the auditing process, or who have it dangling before them (isn't that everyone?) greatly enjoyed the spin taken in The High Impact dramatic debut performance for VALBEC.

The importance of connections and relationships is taken up in this edition of Fine Print. Colin Lankshear's article examines the relationships between attention and information. He argues that we are in the process of moving from a goods-based economy to an information-based one, and that this will have profound implications for literacy and literacy teaching. Increasingly immersed in a deluge of information, we need to 'develop frames and organisers that facilitate paying attention to data, so that we can turn raw data into something useful'. Lankshear gives us a further take on the relationship between attention and information through his analysis of the work of Goldhaber, who asserts that it is the getting and the giving of attention that will drive this new economy. Attention is scarce, we compete for it, and it is implicit in our search for meaning in the world. Educators need to 'pay more attention to attention'.

In 'From Catechism to Critical Literacy', Betty Johnston draws parallels between the pedagogical approaches of language-based literacy with frameworks and strategies for teaching numeracy. Numeracy is more than mathematics, it involves 'the effective, critical use of maths in context, and for a purpose.' Many of us exposed to the traditional instrumental approach to maths have been left feeling a little damaged by the experience, seeing ourselves as inadequate, passive recipients of teachers' expert knowledge. Johnston describes the importance of a constructivist approach where teachers seek activities to provoke and engage learners through skills such as predicting, hypothesising and imagining in the context of real life situations. She provides specific examples of situations to stimulate mathematical thinking, to develop in numeracy that which 'perturbs the intellect, captures the imagination and awakens the spirit'.

The importance of connections and relationships in the development of positive learning environments where the self-image of learners can be nurtured comes across very clearly in Louisa Ellum's article 'Learning in Circles for Young Adults'. In working with students who had disengaged from learning or who had negative experiences of education, Ellum describes how learning circles democratise learning and bring participants together in an equal and collaborative way. Ellum shows how learning circles work and the positive effects that they have had on participants—including the facilitators. The second stage of the learning circle program, 'Moving Memories and Mentors' effectively paired young participants in the program with older members of the local area. Life stories were shared and literacy developed through building collaborative learning within the context of the local community.

The regular features of *Fine Print* also offer thought-provoking reading. Many of us grapple with notions of inclusion and exclusion when responding to difficult classroom behaviours. In Practical Matters, David McKay explores some strategies for dealing with challenging students derived from his experience as a student counsellor.

The editorial group is confident that you will find much to reflect on and stimulate your practice in this winter edition of *Fine Print*. We sadly say goodbye to Rachel Wilson with the completion of this edition. We wish you well, Rachel, as you go on to pursue further study, and thank you for the enormous contribution you have made to the creation of each edition of *Fine Print* over the last few years. Your establishment of process, organisational skills, commitment and pleasant manner will be greatly missed.

Digging the facts: attention economics, information and new literacies

by Lynne Matheson with Colin Lankshear

This article, inspired by Colin Lankshear's presentation at the VALBEC Twilight Forum in March, includes extracts from a recent book, *New Literacies: Changing Knowledge and Classroom Learning* which he co-authored with Michele Knobel.

On a balmy, late autumn evening, I caught the train into the city for the first VALBEC Twilight Forum for 2003. It was March 20 and the significance of the date became more apparent to me when I emerged from Flinders Street Station to a hubbub of people of all ages surging along Swanston Street. I noticed a young man writing on the footpath in chalk the message 'Peace Rally State Library, 6 pm. 'Say No to War' was printed on a banner draped on the wall of St Paul's Cathedral, and 'Books not Bombs' badges were pinned on the school uniforms of students. These were the signs around me vying for attention when I entered Young and Jackson's Hotel. Upstairs in our private room, to those of us gathered, there was a sense of divided attention. The approach of the peace rally outside seemed at odds with the purpose of our presence in the realm of 'Chloe'.

However, we were soon engaged by Colin Lankshear and his topic 'Attention Economics, Information and New Literacies'. Colin has been living and working in Mexico and there was a sense of anticipation in the room to hear what Colin has been working on in recent times. Subsequent to his talk Colin gave us access to a chapter from his recent book, *New Literacies*, co-authored with Michele Knobel. This has been used to draw on some of the concepts that he spoke of in his presentation at the Twilight Forum. Along with reflections, parts of the written text are interspersed to try and recapture what Colin expressed to us that night before disappearing to the Bruce Springsteen Concert!

So what is meant by economics of attention? In the introduction to the chapter Colin explains:

In recent years a growing number of writers have begun talking about an economics of attention. They see this operating in relation to information, and within the context of the burgeoning information revolution associated with digital technologies. This trend is often traced back to an observation made more than 30 years ago by the economist Herbert Simon. According to Simon:

What information consumes is rather obvious. It consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it (Simon 1971, p.40–41).

In this chapter we look at the economics of attention—or what some theorists (for example, Goldhaber 1997) refer to as an emerging attention economy—in relation to digital technologies and a likely array of new literacies…people's efforts to attract, sustain, and build attention under new media conditions can be seen already to have spawned a range of new social practices and new forms of literacy associated with them. Moreover, it seems likely that this tendency will continue, and that the economics of attention will be a potent catalyst for the evolution and development of new literacies in the years ahead.

As a first example of this Colin referred to the work of Richard Lanham (1994):

Lanham's concern in *The Economics of Attention* (1994) is with the changing world of the library and, particularly, the changing role of librarians in the age of digitised information and communications technologies. According to Lanham, it is important to understand the economics of attention if we are to address questions like: how are libraries and librarians to negotiate the changing terrain of information, what kind of changes are involved, and where should one look for clues to handling the changes? Lanham begins by observing that we currently seem to be moving from 'the goods economy' to 'the information economy' (Lanham 1994, n.p.). Within the so-called information economy, we are 'drowning' in a particular form of information. This is what Lanham calls information as raw data. In this form, information is not a scarce resource. It is superabundant.

On the other hand, information in other forms, or senses, is in short supply. Lanham argues that we use different terms for

information depending on how much attention—that is, 'the action that turns raw data into something humans can use'—has been given to it (ibid). No attention leaves us with 'raw data'. Some attention yields 'massaged data'. Lots of attention gives us 'useful information'. Maximal attention yields 'wisdom' (ibid). To simplify his argument, Lanham reduces these types of information to Data, Information and Wisdom. According to Lanham, information and wisdom are in shortest supply.

This was something that I could relate to with two teenage sons working on projects from home with minimal physical access to library resources and plentiful access to the internet. The potential to receive data is immense but the actual thinking and reflecting take time and considerable effort that are not always seen as a priority. But then Colin described how Lanham refers to the realms of art installations that in many cases serve to challenge and confound.

To further explain what he means by attention structures, Lanham takes examples from very different walks of life. First, he considers an example from the world of conceptual art. He describes an environmental art exhibit by the artist Christo. This involved erecting many large umbrellas in two very different kinds of location—a rainy valley in Japan and a desert mountain pass in southern California. By this means, says Lanham, Christo, created 'temporary attention structures to make us pause and ponder how we engage in large scale collective human effort' (ibid). The 'product' was attention structures rather than objects. 'The centre of the project…became the contrast in how each culture went about its work, both social and geographic' (ibid).

Lanham sees this kind of example in terms of the macroeconomics of attention. Lanham sees the problem of information overload associated in particular with new ICTs in terms of the microeconomics of attention. How, in short, can human attention sort out an overwhelming flow of information?

I was kind of with him on this but it was heading in to the weird terrain of abstraction that needed a more concrete metaphor.

From the perspective of the microeconomics of attention, Lanham asks how the overload of information carried by 'the rich signal'—which he sees as being the heart of the digital revolution—can be managed. This signal can be manifested as alphabetic text, as image and as sound. It 'creates its own internal economy of attention.' Moving to an opposite pole from his conceptual art example, Lanham illustrates the nature and role of attention structures in relation to the microeconomics of attention by reference to jet-figher cockpit displays. He suggests, provocatively:

If one is looking for a glimpse of what literacy will look like in the future, the fighter cockpit is a good place to look…The

most interesting conversation I have had about literacy at the end of the twentieth century was with a fellow who designed avionic displays for fighters. He knew all the basic questions and a good many of the answers (Lanham 1994).

In the cockpit digital data arrives at quantum rates in alphabetical and numerical information, in iconic displays, and as audio signals. This posed a design question of how to mix all this data information into 'a single functioning information structure' that would allow the pilot's mind to make sense of data coming 'thick and fast'. It represents a technical instance of the larger questions of how to develop structures—frames and organisers—that facilitate paying attention to data so that we can turn it into something useful. Moreover, who will develop these structures?

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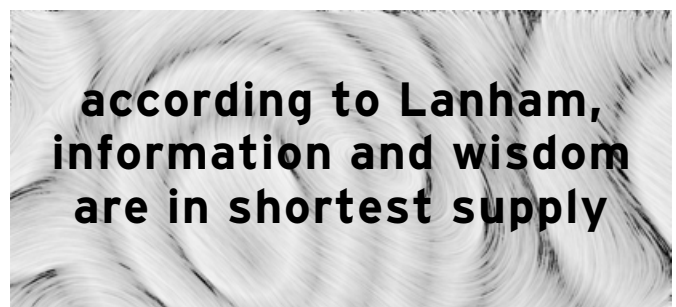
This highly visual analogy made a powerful point about the ways in which we are forced to contend with multiple screens and devices in a range of settings. I could relate the example of information processing that women in our beginner English class are engaged in when using word processing on the computer as a way of learning the alphabet. At the same time they are learning about computer icons and operations. Whether it is coming 'thick and fast' is another matter but I could see the parallel to the fighter pilot.

Colin moved on to talk about the world of advertising and the attention economy and research undertaken by The Aspen Institute and National Cash Registers' Knowledge Lab. We could probably relate to the examples he used with our experiences of regular email bombardments of spam, unsolicited advertising and screens inviting us to join in or buy that linger after we thought we had logged off the internet.

A variation on the notion of attention being a scarce resource within contexts of information can be found in the world of advertising. The challenge of gaining attention, as it becomes an increasingly scarce resource in proportion to information sources competing for it, has emerged as a key motif within advertising discourse during recent years. As a domain of human practice advertising has a strong stake in the economics of attention. According to Richard Adler (1997, 1975), the 'first challenge for every advertiser is to capture and hold the attention of the intended audience'.

Advertisers actually have to create attention to products in which those people being pitched at typically have no inherent interest. Notwithstanding the massive and increasing amount of time citizens in affluent countries spend using or consuming media of one kind or another, advertising faces ever-increasing competition for attention. Furthermore, the viability of those same media that are used for advertising—from TV (whether public broadcast or cable) to the WWW, via newspapers, magazines and radio—fluctuate with and depend upon levels and constancy of advertising revenue.

In 1996 the Aspen Institute hosted a seminar to assess the current state of, and prospect for, the field of advertising and to identify perspectives on how individuals choose to allocate their attention. The seminar made particular reference to the context of emerging new media, notably the internet and WWW. These have the potential to challenge established media as advertising channels. During the past decade, as use has continued to grow rapidly, the internet has been transformed 'from a non-profit medium for academic and personal communication into a dynamic commercial medium'. Most major corporations and many small companies have now established online presence (ibid, p.20). At present, internet advertising accounts for only a tiny proportion of total current advertising expenditure. Nonetheless, it is growing rapidly. Marketers and advertisers have mounted a hot search in attempts to create ever new and more effective means for gaining attention.

The internet, however, presents advertisers with issues and challenges that differ in degree and kind from other media. Adler notes that the Web produces a massive 'fragmentation of channels' (ibid, p.21), on a scale far greater than anything advertisers have yet faced. As the original situation of a very small core of television networks became dozens and then literally 'hundreds of different cable- and satellite-delivered channels,' advertisers had to switch from broadcast to narrowcast strategies. With the advent of the internet, however, 'there are now potentially millions of channels available, with the conceivable end point being a separate, customised channel for each individual' (ibid, p.21–22). The growth of new interactive media creates the possibility for one-to-one marketing. This involves a strategy which focuses less on building advertising market share than on 'investigating a company's best customers and building a one-to-one relationship with them' in order to get more purchasing or consuming per customer by 'treating them as individuals…(to) build loyalty' (ibid, p.24).

This is a context where there is much to play for and where old kinds of intermediaries and partnerships change and new ones are invented. For example, distribution expenses may account for 50–80 per cent of the end cost of consumer products. Hence, if producers can bypass conventional marketing and distribution intermediaries and sell direct to the consumer via the internet, this creates potentially huge advantages for consumers in terms of cost and ease. This ups the ante for advertisers. At the same time,

internet users have greater potential than users of other media to actively control the information they receive. In internet advertising, the relative balance of power shifts from producers to consumers of advertising. On the WWW customers do not face the choice of sitting through intrusive ads (ibid, p.37). The logic that has to operate in internet advertising is less one of how media users can opt out of advertisements to one of how advertisers can get users to opt in to marketing information.

the growth of new interactive media creates the possibility for one-to-one marketing
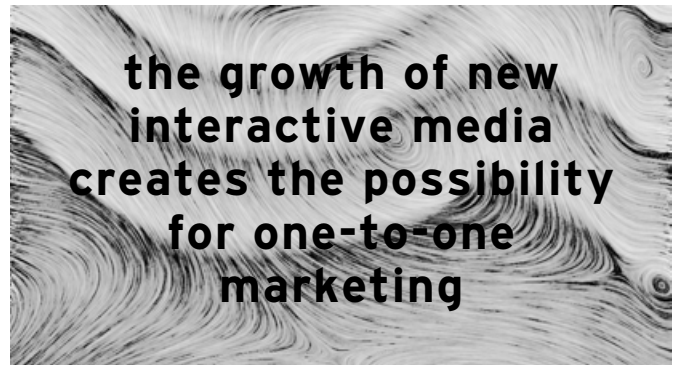
As one who does not shop online, mutes the ads on TV and refuses to listen to commercial radio, I resist the concept of being coerced to opt in to the market. It seems like the old 'steak knives' incentive taken a step further with personalised steak knives to match the profile internet advertisers have established of you through your online shopping.

The Lab developed and trademarked the concept of 'Relationship Technologies' and defined attention as 'engagement with information.' The key to successful business in the future, says the Lab, will be the capacity to generate and maintain personal attention to new and existing customers.

According to the Lab's research, this can be done by using relationship technologies to create attention transactions in which information flows back and forward between content providers (the business or commercial interest) and content users (potential and actual customers). The idea here is quite straightforward. Attention is 'engagement with information'. Hence, both-way information flows grounded in reciprocal interest are, effectively, attention transactions that create and sustain relationships (ibid, p.7). The Lab believed in the efficacy of paying attention in order to gain and maintain attention.

A pinnacle of an attention-based relationship is where a company can 'move from mass customisation to engaging customers in the design of products for themselves'. Those companies who are best able to provide 'intelligent agents or intermediaries' will get 'first call' on consumers' attention. To be successful, companies will have to identify technologies best suited to capture consumers' attention, 'and "own" the newly emerging personal access points'.

In contrast to this view of the attention economy, Colin introduced some ideas advanced by Michael Goldhaber. According to Goldhaber:

> The fact that information is in over-saturated supply makes the idea of an information economy incoherent. This is because 'economics are governed by what is scarce' (Goldhaber 1997, n.p.) or, more accurately, because economies are based on 'what is both most desirable and ultimately most scarce' (Goldhaber 1998b, n.p.). If people in post-industrial societies increasingly live their lives in the spaces of the internet, these lives will fall more and more under economic laws organic to this new space. Accordingly, Goldhaber (1997, 1998a) argues that the basis of the coming new economy will be attention and not information. Attention, unlike information, is inherently scarce. This, says Goldhaber (1998b, n.p.), is because 'each of us has only so much of it to give, and (attention) can only come from us—not machines, computers or anywhere else'. But like information, attention moves through the internet. Goldhaber identifies cyberspace as the being where the attention economy will come into its own.

> Goldhaber's particular conception of an attention economy is premised on the fact that the human capacity to produce material things outstrips the net capacity to consume the things that are produced. As he puts it, the 'material needs at the level of creature comfort' of those who are 'in a position to demand them' are 'fairly well satisfied' (Goldhaber 1997, n.p.). This, we should note, is probably the great minority of living human beings. Nonetheless, for this powerful minority, the need for attention becomes increasingly important, and increasingly the focus of their productive activity.

> When our material desires are more or less satisfied, says Goldhaber (1998a) such that we do not experience scarcity of material necessities like food and shelter, we are increasingly driven by 'desires of a less strictly material kind'. Goldhaber claims that some of these desires, such as a desire for meaning in our lives, converge toward a desire for attention. He sees the quest for meaning as being linked to questions like 'why are we here, and how do we know that we are somehow worthwhile? If a person feels utterly ignored by those around her, she is unlikely to feel that her life has much meaning to them. Since all meaning is ultimately conferred by society, one must have the attention of others if there is to be any chance that one's life is meaningful' (ibid, n.p.).

This struck me as a totally self-absorbed view of the world but hey, I'm a 40-something female living in suburban Melbourne. Getting attention at the dinner table is my nightly challenge!

After watching an episode of 'Sex in the City' the desire for attention portrayed by the characters seemed fairly meaningless

the basis of the coming new economy will be attention and not information
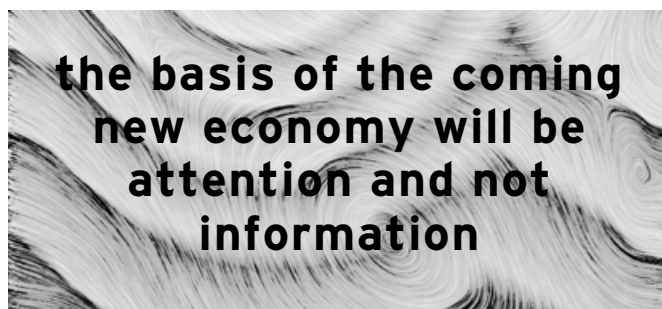
in the extreme but I wonder if they are the type of 'shes' in Goldhaber's scheme of things.

> Goldhaber claims that the energies set free by the successes of the money-industrial economy go more and more in the direction of obtaining attention. And that leads to growing competition for what is increasingly scarce, which is of course attention. It sets up an unending scramble, a scramble that also increases the demands on each of us to pay what scarce attention we can (Goldhaber 1997, n.p.).

This is the genesis of Goldhaber's conception of the attention economy—which differs substantially from Lanham's view and from that advanced by researchers concerned with advertising within the network economy. For example, Goldhaber's account focuses on individuals pursuing attention for their own purposes in terms of finding meaning for their lives under 'post-materialist' conditions. By contrast, Lanham addresses the pursuit of attention structures that will enable other people to use information effectively in relation to what they are interested in. For its part, the work of the Aspen Institute and the NCR Knowledge Lab seeks in different ways to help companies mobilise attention in the interests of selling consumer items to customers who believe their purposes are served by purchasing them.

Goldhaber thinks that people who live in economically advanced societies are socialised in ways that actually orient them toward pursuit of attention. He observes that during recent decades young people in the West have spent a huge proportion of their waking hours within two key contexts: either in school, or engrossed in media—especially television and audio-recordings. The experiences of these contexts involve paying great amounts of attention. And they involve focusing attention on 'a relative few' (Goldhaber 1998a): TV personalities, stars in different fields (music, sport, films) whom we attend to via television or audio media or contemporary multimedia, teachers, selected members of our peer group, and so on.

Goldhaber notes that everyone who is seen on television models one common role, as do all teachers in schools, and that role is to be the object of a good deal of attention. Thus, without planning or intention, there has been a kind of cultural revolution, telling us that getting attention is a fine thing. And for many of us, having

the attention of others turns out to feel very good, something we often want more of (ibid.).

Finally, gaining attention is indexical to originality. It is difficult, says Goldhaber, to get new attention 'by repeating exactly what you or someone else has done before.' Consequently, the attention economy is based on 'endless originality, or at least attempts at originality' (Goldhaber 1997, n.p.). Attention is a function of 'everything that makes you distinctly you and not somebody else' (Goldhaber 1998b, 9th principle).

Reality television and talk shows spring to mind.

Pushing on, Colin then talked about the new literacies and the economics of attention, providing some sketches of the sorts of new literacies we can imagine or expect.

Contact displaying—jackets (and similar gadgets) that work

This is the idea of using highly customisable, mobile, public media that employ Lanham's 'rich signal'—like the video display jacket—as a medium for conceptualising, designing and assembling texts of different kinds that are intended to catch the eye and establish a basis for gaining attention. Not every jacket, however, will 'work' in an attention economy. Not every jacket owner/wearer will be able to use it successfully as a means to initiate and gain real attention. Moreover, the jacket itself (or any similar device) cannot be the medium for sustained attention unless its wearer can claim a 'space' to which others 'return' in order to see what she or he is up to today. The technological medium could work very well for designers of a wide range of cultural forms.

Skimming

There is much about the modus operandi of *skim.com* and their customers that speaks to the theme of new literacies in the service of gaining attention. The company's tagline, 'skim.com provokes communication' is a carefully contrived attention-grabbing device that uses language in an arresting way—for example, provoking as distinct from inviting communication. The message to consumers is 'wear this item with the skim.com number and you will attract attention!' Indeed, the explanation provided for how the number

the attention economy is based on 'endless originality, or at least attempts at originality'

works begins with 'Step 1: You attract people's attention…Step 2: They note the number and send you an email…' Communicative practices—literacies—are absolutely integral to skim.com's project (a Discourse) of shaping identity formation in its own economic interests and those of similar organisations.

Scenariating

Building or narrating scenarios (scenariating) is a good way of coming up with original or fresh ideas of the kind needed to attract and sustain attention. Scenarios are catchy narratives that describe possible futures and alternative paths toward the future, based on plausible hypotheses and assumptions grounded in the present. We think of scenariating as comprising a kind of literacy because it is a way of reading and writing the world (of the future). It also, of course, involves the literal production of texts. In relation to the economics of attention, scenariating is a potentially significant new literacy. In part this is because it provides a basis for coming up with innovative, original, and interesting information. In addition, however, scenarios address topics in which almost everybody has a keen interest: what the future might be like and how to prepare for it. Scenarios can work very well as attention structures, providing frames within which people can work on information in ways that make it useful.

Attention-transferring (or 'trickle across')

The principle of transferring is apparent each time one uses a search engine to locate information on a well-recognised expert or authority and turns up a student assignment, or reads a journal article that takes the form of an interview with a well known person conducted (and published) by a much less known (or unknown) person, or when one happens upon web pages and 'zines lovingly assembled by fans. Transferring is based on the principle that 'you have to be in to win.' If one has something to say or offer that might otherwise remain unrecognised and unknown, one has nothing to lose by hitching it to or bundling it up with a personality or theme that enjoys a good deal of attention. This literacy may involve nothing more than inserting references or hyperlinks into a text published on the WWW. At a more complex level, it may involve negotiating an interview, conducting, editing, and 'thematising' the interview, and then getting it placed for publication.

Attention transferring will also be an important aspect of other literacies like contact displaying. In many ways, of course, there is absolutely nothing new about either the principle or the practice of attention-transfer in either chronological or ontological terms. What is new, we would suggest, is the idea of taking it seriously as a form of literacy that goes beyond standard conceptions of fair acknowledgment, acceptable citation, referencing and bibliographic practices, and so on.

Joseph Gutnick might like to take up this theme!

Time had run out and Colin was keen to meet The Boss (Bruce Springsteen) who was about to play at the Rod Laver Arena. Colin had certainly given us much to think about and I have found myself since that night being conscious of attention frameworks and how seemingly fragmented our lives have become in the 'busyness' of technology, the media and social networks.

But over to Colin for the final word…

Finally, what, if anything, might all this mean for literacy education and literacy educators working within schools, higher education and other formal and non-formal literacy programs? For many people, no doubt, the increasing preoccupation with attention in various guises that is evident among pockets of influence whose effective power is wildly out of proportion to their size, is something we would best resist or, at least ignore. There is much to be said for this view. The economics of attention unleashes some base consequences, as does commodification in any of its most familiar forms.

At the same time, within harsh and increasingly individualised settings dominated by the rapacious insistence of the American Dream, and with little evidence that current trends will reverse in the foreseeable future, persons who cannot engage effectively with the economics of attention may be severely disadvantaged. This does not imply playing along with it and 'leveraging' it for personal gain. It does, however, mean being able to deal with attention on one's own informed terms. And to do that probably requires understanding how the economics of attention play out. (In many instances, of course, managing attention effectively is downright necessary for survival, as the baby's cry attests). Of course, if attention itself needs to be educated in order that it may be recruited for more expansive and humanising ends, then there may be no better place to start educating attention that from within education itself.

From this standpoint, perhaps the examples sketched here are sufficient to indicate and illustrate the nature and extent of the challenge facing formal education if we believe schools ought to be paying more attention to attention. Many of the (new) literacies identified here are higher order literacies and meta-literacies. Some are good for creating opportunities to gain attention, others for facilitating and structuring attention, and others for getting and maintaining attention. Some are good for a combination of these.

The economics of attention unleashes some base consequences, as does commodification in any of its most familiar forms

Few of them, however, are closely related to most of what passes for literacy in schools today.

This is a major challenge in its own right. There is, however, a prior problem that, like so much else that concerns us here, can be seen in terms of mindsets. This is that attention is currently constituted mainly as a problem for schools. For example, 'attention seeking' is closely associated—often cited as a cause—with behavioural problems. On the other hand, learning difficulties are often attributed to 'short attention spans' and 'attention deficiency'. Schools are caught between trying both to reduce and increase attention.

Interestingly, what we might call postmodern worlds of the Web, channel surfing, and 'playing the future' (Rushkoff 1996) and post-materialist worlds of the attention economy openly embrace tendencies that currently constitute problems for schools. It may well be time in formal education to rethink the issue of attention. The interface between digital technologies and new literacies offers a promising place to start.

Colin Lankshear is a part-time professorial research fellow at the University of Ballarat, an adjunct professor at Central Queensland University, a part-time teacher at the National Autonomous University of Mexico and a freelance educational researcher and writer living in Mexico. His most recent works include a co-edited book titled *Cyber Spaces/Social Spaces*. Colin can be contacted at the School of Education, University of Ballarat, PO Box 663, Ballarat 3353.

From catechism to critical literacy: figuring out a challenging numeracy

by Betty Johnston

Many readers may recognise this article's title as a reference to Garth Boomer's 1986 paper 'From Catechism to Communication'. The paper is a powerful plea to the maths education community to learn from the Language and Learning movement in Australia and to shift the emphasis in maths learning from an instrumental approach to one that generates a relational understanding.

I have worked with adult learners and their teachers, mostly in numeracy, but also with close colleagues who were working in literacy. Who are the students who need literacy and numeracy education as adults?

There are some who have had little schooling in the first place. They come from places like Nepal or Somalia or Brazil, and there is much that we can learn about what these places are doing in adult numeracy (for example, Knijnik 1996). Then there are those who have not fitted in at school, whose lives have not matched school demands, who need a second chance. We have increasing evidence that numeracy skills are important in adult life, for employment, of course, but also in order to critically evaluate everyday situations (for example, Hajaj 2002). We also have some evidence that a large proportion of Australian adults lack these numeracy skills (Johnston 2002).

Why haven't they succeeded? Let's go back to Boomer. In 1986 he said:

> Not to put too fine a point on it, the present state of mathematics is a threat to democracy. Too many are denied full access to it, too many fail it and too many come to rely on those few who have been initiated. Human dignity is undermined by the submerged guilt about inadequacy that resides with so many of our citizens.

There are some challenges that schools cannot meet, but have things in schools changed much since 1986? Perhaps a little. We are being challenged to think about what numeracy might be. In South Australia for instance there is currently a great opportunity for change in working with the new curriculum definitions. For me, the important question is: can schools make learning maths accessible, enjoyable, and useful to younger students so that fewer have to suffer the effects of lack of numeracy, or re-learn as adults?

I hope this question is relevant to you too. In the rest of the paper I want to explore four issues that relate to this main question:

1 Theories and frameworks: why have them?
2 A framework for making meaning in numeracy.
3 One aspect of the framework: constructing concepts.
4 Other urgencies in the framework: using, being aware, being critical, being real.

1 Frameworks and theories: why have them?

I want to present a theoretical framework that colleagues and I have developed for numeracy learning, and about two particular aspects of that framework.

You may say, why use theories? In a sense the answer is, if you don't, then theories use you. Frameworks and theories are important because they generate:
• explanations about, in this case, learning and teaching
• approaches, for how to do it.

The theories that we use have implications for how we explain events, and for what we do about them.

Let me give an example of how theories might be used. My daughter was a truant. How could we understand this? What should we do? There were at least four explanations, four theories: the 'problem' was:
• in her head
• in her family
• in the school
• in the system, or the society.

What we did about the situation, would depend on the explanation that made sense to us:
• in the first case, we would approach a psychologist
• in the second case, we might undergo family therapy
• in the third case, we might have got her to change school, or we might have tried to change aspects of the current school
• in the fourth case, we might have tried to change society!

We rejected the first two explanations and their accompanying 'solutions'. We would have liked to take on board the fourth explanation, but felt a little daunted, so we made do with the third.

Theories of learning

There are lots of theories—'explanations'—about how people learn, which can be matched up with a range of metaphors, for example:

- they absorb
- they construct
- they blossom

Again, what you do as a teacher depends on the theory you hold. How do you teach if you believe people absorb knowledge? If they construct it? If they simply blossom?

The following framework draws on a number of theories and can be used for thinking about concepts and social situations relevant to numeracy, for helping to plan programs and ways of teaching, and for expanding the range of perspectives that might be addressed.

2 A framework for making meaning in numeracy

Most second chance learners have experienced a lifetime of rote learning, of the instrumental approach. What other dimensions of their education have they missed?

Working with my literacy colleagues I came across a 1992 article by Peter Freebody and Alan Luke about literacy (Freebody & Luke 1990). It discussed a framework for thinking about what it called 'the four reader roles': text decoder, text participator, text user and text analyst. Many of you may know this article.

Could these be transferred to numeracy? Those of us working in adult numeracy have often found that literacy frameworks and strategies can be related usefully to numeracy contexts. It seemed to us that this framework was crying out for translation, to turn the reader roles into dimensions of meaning making in maths.

So what would these roles become? For some of you this will be familiar territory.

Decoder

…in the article, this role has a focus on the mechanics of print and the conventions of written English.

…in numeracy, we see it as making meaning through codes, and rote operations

Participant

…in the article, this role has a focus on comprehension of the basic meaning of a text.

…in numeracy, we see it as making meaning through engagement in mathematical concepts.

User

…in the article, this role has a focus on the function of a text within a social context.

…in numeracy, we see it as making meaning through using mathematics appropriately in social contexts.

Analyst

…in the article, this role has a focus on questioning the representations of the world embedded in the text.

…in numeracy, we see it as making meaning through understanding the power of mathematics and its capacity to mystify and exclude as well as to solve problems.

In addition, cultural awareness

As an extension of the last two categories, it seemed crucial for mathematics, which is so often presented as universal and a-historical, to make explicit another dimension not in the original framework:

…making meaning through the cultural and historical awareness of the genesis of mathematical ideas. What shall we call this role? The historian? The ethnomathematician?

How can the framework help?

How does this work in numeracy? How does it help us think about teaching and learning? We could use as our jumping off point for applying the framework any one of a number of starting points, such as:

- a mathematical concept, for example, subtraction or simple equations
- another school subject, for example, geography or art
- a particular technology, for example, calculators or spreadsheets
- a particular social context, for example, a class excursion or the war in Iraq.

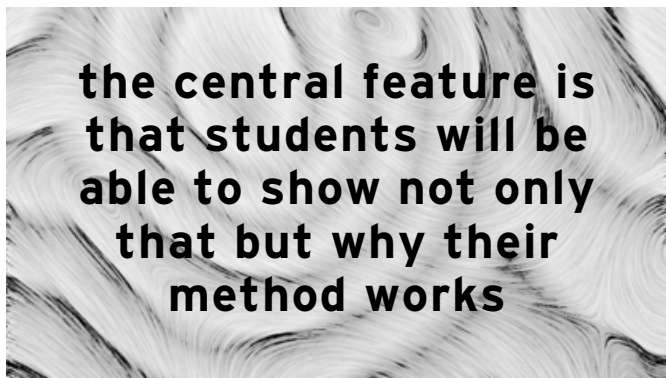I will work through one example, which starts with a mathematical concept—subtraction.

Starting with a concept

Think about how you might work out 76 − 28.

Coding

It is obviously crucial to know the codes, numerals, and signs. Like most of the second chance learners I have worked with, some of you have probably experienced a lifetime of rote learning—tables, adding, sin and cosine, Pythagoras—it's been hard for some, though a few flourish. Many of us learnt how to do 76 – 28 by the 'borrow and pay back' method: we learnt the words, the procedure, what one child I heard of called the 'song'.

We could say, 'so, that's how you do it!' But is this enough even if you're good at it?

> **the central feature is that students will be able to show not only that but why their method works**

Participating or building concepts

A more active, constructivist approach adds conceptual understanding. There is an emphasis on ownership, on making sense of maths. This was the core of Boomer's article. You might collect or generate a variety of methods, get the students to explain, question, talk, use multiple embodiments, make links. The central feature is that students will be able to show not only *that* but *why* their method works. Trading tens for units is one of the possible methods.

They will be able to say, 'that's why it works!' But, is this enough?

Using

The above example (for example, trading) is still in the classroom context. Where is subtraction used in students' lives? Scoring games like darts? Shopping? Checking change? There are not as many examples of its use as there were a few decades ago, but complementary addition or 'shopkeeper's change' is still sometimes encountered.

And so they will be able to say, 'that's how it's used! That's what it means in the world!' But, is this enough?

Being culturally aware

To think that there is only one way of doing it, that it is universal, freezes maths into textbooks and experts' heads. To collect community ways of doing, in this case, subtraction, to look up in books and trace how different societies did and recorded it,

adds an understanding that maths is generated by people, for social purposes. We begin to see that perhaps we could generate maths too. In figure 1, I give an example of how the Romans might have done subtraction. It's surprisingly easy, and I don't know if in fact they did do it this way. It would make a good project: can we find out whether in fact they did do such things?

And we begin to be able to say, 'so that's where it came from!' But even this, is this enough?

Critically analysing

We're getting there! But still we aren't asking why use the maths at all, why use *this* method, is it helping us or misleading us? Graphs are widely misused. Just type in 'misleading graphs' on the Google internet search engine and you will come up with a wide range. Look at how the choice of scale can distort. In relation to subtraction, we often see graphs that do not start at zero on the y-axis, but, quite legitimately (it is an agreed convention, particularly when the numbers are large) subtract a common number from all the categories. Try drawing a graph to compare support for the leaders of our two main political parties (I would draw this but don't know how on my computer!). Say one has 51 per cent support, the other 49 per cent. This might be graphed in full. It might be graphed so that the bottom 40 per cent is left out. Or, to be extreme, it might leave out the bottom 47 per cent. In the first case, the graph makes it clear that the leaders are neck and neck. In the last, it will look as though the leader of the first party has twice the support of the other leader. Can you get students to construct graphs in such a way that the information will support their arguments, and contest other positions? If they can do this themselves, they are more likely to be able to see that figures, data, graphs…can lie.

'That's why it's important!' Is this, with all these other dimensions, finally enough? Is this numeracy?

And so, numeracy

This—all these together—are good, powerful dimensions of maths in the world. They make what some of us have been calling numeracy, and it can be argued that numeracy is more than mathematics, that it involves the effective, critical use of maths in a context for a purpose.

There are a number of similar, interesting definitions of numeracy. The South Australian definition is one: 'the ability to understand, analyse, critically respond to and use mathematics in different social contexts'.

Another quite extensive one is the recently developed definition that is part of the international Adult Literacy and Lifeskills

survey (ALLS). Its brief version describes it as 'the knowledge and skills to effectively manage the mathematical demands of diverse situations' (ALLS, accessed 2003).

3 One aspect of the framework: constructing concepts

As I said earlier, we all work from theories. All teachers work from a theory of learning, but Boomer points out in his argument for an underpinning theory of learning that this is often not explicit:

> While teachers operate at an intuitive level as pragmatists, not articulating to themselves the present theory which drives their practice, they are effectively paralysed in terms of their capacity to change radically. The non-theorised practitioner is a kind of well-intentioned misguided or unguided missile in the classroom, likely to take up a new idea and add it to the repertoire, but unable to generate infinite practice for new contexts (Boomer, 1986).

A constructivist approach to learning

I would like to highlight again the theory that Boomer spoke about in that early talk. It owed much, he said, to the seminal work of the Russian Vygotsky, who died in 1930. I want to summarise Boomer's description of some of Vygotsky's argument.

Vygotsky argued that from birth we are continually building 'spontaneous concepts', and that the consequences of new actions lead to new conceptions. Once we have spontaneous concepts that work, we, as a society, try to pass these on to those who follow. And so, we try our hand at formal teaching. Vygotsky went on to examine how formal concepts are related to spontaneous ones: the heart of the schooling process. We may want to teach the formal concept of 'angle'. We could be quite instrumental about it, and require that a definition be learnt and recited. It is likely that such learning would lead only to 'empty verbalisation'.

To avoid this hollowness, ways must be found, says Vygotsky, to activate related spontaneous concepts and use them as grappling hooks to help bridge the gap between the spontaneous and formal concepts. The learners may be encouraged to talk of things that turn, of clocks or swings, to draw them, to model them, to build language around them. The teacher will devise various ways of coming at a problem, searching for analogies, throwing out as many 'grappling hooks' as possible.

Vygotsky is one of a number of theorists, including Piaget and Dewey, whose work has shaped current theories of constructivism.

Different approaches to knowledge

The instrumental approach that many of the adult students have grown up with sees knowledge as objective, true, universal and unproblematic. A constructivist approach to knowledge however sees it very differently as being invented through human activity, subjective, viable rather than true, socially negotiated and problematic.

Just as the different theories about why my daughter was a truant would lead to different courses of action, these two views of knowledge have very different implications for what students and teachers might actually do in classrooms. Some of these implications are summarised in Table 1.

Principles and strategies for a constructivist approach

If you see knowledge instrumentally, then as a teacher you are likely to see yourself as expert, transmitting relevant information to learners whose task is to absorb and reproduce that information.

If on the other hand you want to generate a learning environment informed by a more constructivist approach to knowledge, then you will be seeking activities that provoke or engage. You will try to get the learners to imagine, predict and hypothesise. You will try to scaffold their building of concepts. You will encourage them to explain, relate, and locate their knowledge.

Such principles would allow you to develop strategies to:
• 'perturb' or 'provoke' the students' current frameworks by providing new experience which disagrees with older meanings
• seek their predictions and hypotheses
• scaffold by encouraging the development of appropriate language
• scaffold by modelling and using concrete materials
• locate concepts in historical and/or cultural contexts
• encourage discussion, reflection and critique.

Examples from a constructivist viewpoint

One or more of these strategies inform each of the following examples.

Measurement
How do you usually begin a lesson on weighing? Many times I have heard something like, 'today we will learn about metric measures'. A few weeks ago in a NSW third grade classroom I watched a teacher engage a class with an urgent issue. He told them about how his baby son had had a cold and how some tissues seemed stronger than others. How might you measure the strength of a tissue, he asked. The students had lots of bright ideas. He

Table 1: Knowledge, learning and teaching

	Instrumental	Constructivist
Knowledge as:	• existing independent of individuals • objective • true • universal • unproblematic	• invented through human activity • subjective • viable • socially negotiated • problematic
Learning as:	• reception of information • absorption of facts • reproduction	• constructing, assimilating and adapting • dealing with perturbation • reconstructing
Teaching as:	• transmission • expert • concern for product	• questioning, provoking • scaffolding, facilitating • concern for process

had several different types of tissues, he sent some students to get more from the office. They talked about water, and weights. They guessed what might happen. They set up experiments.

> **learning must start with the issues where students are actively trying to construct meaning**

Percentages

If we were to use an instrumental approach to percentages, we would tell students what they are and how to do them: 'Today we are going to do percentages, this is how we work them out'. We do this, or something like it, often.

Why do we do it this way? Why do we *assume* that students need to know about percentages—or place value, or photosynthesis, or parliaments? To do it this way is to give the answer before the learner has asked the question. If learning is a search for meaning, as constructivism believes, then learning must start with the issues where students are actively trying to construct meaning.

Can we create a situation *provoking the need* for percentages, or some such tool? Can we help them ask questions, *invent* percentages?

If you had a situation like the following you might be able to work towards percentages (as opposed to starting from them):

'In a cricket game, Daryl has scored 16 runs from 25 balls. Jennie has scored 13 runs from 20 balls. Who's doing better?' The discussion might propose fractions as a way of dealing with the comparison, or turning the fractions into decimals, or changing the denominators to 100. It could allow questions about 'why 100?' and the discussion of arbitrary—socially negotiated—conventions.

4 Other urgencies in the framework: being real

I have argued that numeracy involves the effective, critical use of maths in a context for a purpose. It consists of *making meaning* in maths through coding and building concepts, and a constructivist approach gives us some idea of how to go about that building. But numeracy also involves using maths, being culturally aware of its origins, critically analysing its use—it involves being real. And how is that to be done?

It involves:
- recognising and understanding the maths that is being used
- choosing appropriate maths
- asking questions about how it is being used
- exploring who benefits and who loses.

It involves going outside the textbook, outside the classroom. Earlier, I used examples of how graphs might mislead. I would like to conclude with a few more examples of the questions we might ask if we were critically numerate.

Reports

How is the following (actual) argument at fault?

A policy of positive discrimination has allowed the number of women in promotion positions to rise by 60 per cent. The number

of men in similar positions has risen by only 6 per cent over the same period. It is clearly time to revert to a fairer policy.

Banks

Figure 1 shows how much I owe the bank on my mortgage over a 20-year period. I owe a lot at the beginning and the graph shows a slow initial decrease. I pay interest on my loan, and the bank calculates a repayment rate that makes the difference between repayment and interest so small, that for years, my debt hardly decreases. When gradually the debt does become slightly less, the interest will become slightly less, and the difference between interest and repayment will start to be greater and so the debt will at last decrease a bit more and this difference will increasingly increase…and so on.

To whose advantage would it be to start with slightly higher repayments? How is it possible to find yourself owing more than you borrowed? Would it help to pay back a lump sum early?

Newspapers

Can you make sense of the figures in figure 2? Can you draw them, locate the people involved on a map? What does 1 billion mean? Who are these 1.2 billion? It looks as though the rich countries will be contributing less to the rise in CO_2 emissions than the rest. Is this true? How are the energy and pollution figures related?

Letter to a teacher

I would like to conclude this article with a story I have often used.
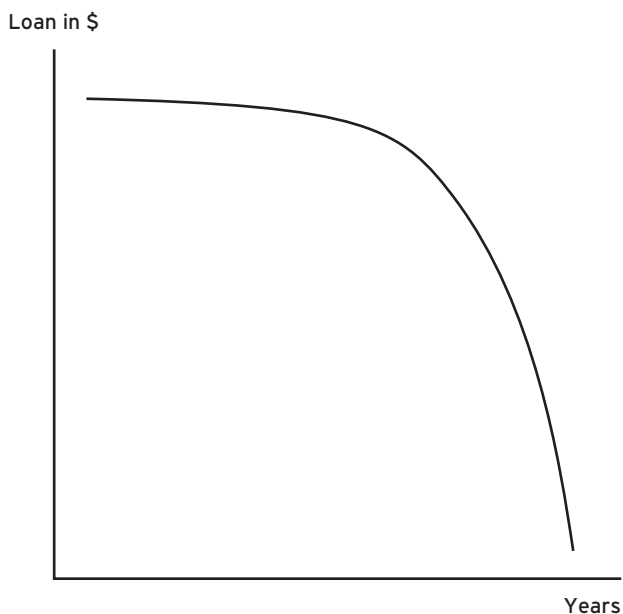
Figure 1

Loan in $

Years

Earth Summit in Johannesburg
Some figures

1.2 billion people live on less than $US1 a day.

CO2 emissions leading to global warming will rise by 33% in rich countries and by 100% in the rest of the world over the next 18 years.

Global energy use will expand in that time by more than 50%.

30% more fresh water will be needed by 2020.

Less than 0.05% of the average income of the 22 richest nations (in OECD) finds its way to the world's least developed countries.

Background paper prepared for OECD meeting in July 2002 reported in the Sydney Morning Herald.

Thirty years ago, eight young Italian boys, failures from school, wrote a small book about the injustices of the education system. They were students at the School of Barbiana, a small group set up by the parish priest of Barbiana to cater to a few of the many young people who were failing in the schools. Their book, *Letter to a Teacher* (School of Barbiana 1969), is a powerful and angry argument written as a year-long project at the school. It is an indictment of the ways in which poverty and class are allowed to shape so many young people's lives.

The argument and evidence is compelling. It is written in a style which the boys describe as 'the humble and sound rules of writing in all ages', namely:

> Have something important to say, something useful to everyone or at least to many. Know for whom you are writing. Gather all useful materials. Find a logical pattern with which to develop the theme. Eliminate every useless word. Eliminate every word not used in the spoken language. Never set time limits (p. 25).

But this written argument, this powerful literacy, is not enough for the authors. They point out to the composite teacher who symbolises their experience:

> You can say you know a lot of other examples, as true as ours, but leading to the opposite conclusions. So, let us drop, all of us, a position that has become too emotional and let us stand on scientific ground. Let us start all over, this time with numbers (p.35).

The extensive data they collect and analyse about failure and retention rates is a graphic demonstration of the bias against

children from farming and working class families. They present their material so comprehensively and so effectively that their book won the prize of the Italian Physics Society, usually reserved for promising physicists, for its use of statistics. Look at the book sometime if you have never seen it, it is hard not to be moved by both the passion and the evidence.

The numeracy learning intrinsic to this story (and to the writings of Palestinian mathematician Munir Fasheh) is as close as I can get to an example which includes all the aspects of learning that we have been exploring. But they also go beyond our framework. They include as well what has been called the 'complete and passionate consciousness' of the moral aspect of learning (Newman 1999). The learning of the boys from the Barbiana school, is a model of numeracy learning as a tool in the struggle for social justice.

To put my argument for what numeracy should be in a nutshell, I would like to use words of Stephanie Pace Mitchell which I found in an article posted on the South Australian Literacy and Numeracy website. We should be seeking a numeracy—or, as she was arguing, an education more generally—that perturbs the intellect, captures the imagination, and awakens the spirit.

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This article was first published at the Literacy and Numeracy Across the Curriculum website at *http://www.thenetwork.sa.edu.au/educators/research/*

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Learning in Circles:
closing the communications gap

by Louisa Ellum

One of the unrecognised problems for disadvantaged young adults is the decline in confidence and communication skills. The Learning in Circles program connects ideas, experiences and community to pave the way for positive dialogue between all generations in the community

Mentoring and meeting needs

SkillsPlus (Peninsula) Inc., a community education provider in Frankston, discovered that its literacy programs were not fully meeting the needs of its young disadvantaged learners. It soon became evident that a program was needed to address the fact that many students were lacking in confidence and did not have the skills to communicate their feelings and opinions effectively.

The Learning in Circles program, delivered in 2001, was designed to meet these needs. Following on from this, the Moving Memories program, delivered in late 2002 to early 2003, was designed to incorporate learning in circles pedagogy with mentoring—pairing 'older' members of the community with the young participants to take learning in circles into a new dimension. Both projects were funded by DETYA under ANTA's Adult Literacy Innovative Projects.

In the development phase of each program, project staff discussed the priorities to be addressed within the pilot projects' model and time frame. The following priorities were identified:
- to provide a rich learning environment that places an emphasis on engaging with language and learning in a social context
- to provide an opportunity for young people to improve their skills in the areas of literacy for self expression and literacy for public debate
- to create a 'safe' environment that allows participants to learn from their own experiences and the experiences of others
- to further develop the organisation's knowledge of the delivery of programs to the target groups
- to address issues expressed by clients in previous programs
- to extend community involvement in further education, particularly in the area of educating disadvantaged youth
- to change disengaged young people's attitude towards learning so they develop a desire to continue learning

- to provide an environment where people are encouraged to work with others they may not normally encounter
- to provide an opportunity to create concrete evidence of achievements.

Learning in circles as an educational tool has enriched the learning, development and participation of the participants within the two programs. It has also positively influenced the way the literacy tutors and facilitators have designed the programs, implemented the CGEA and actually looked at alternative forms of engaging youth in literacy education.

Learning in circles—ideology and practice

A learning circle is built around the idea that everyone has something to contribute. Decisions about what the group will focus on, what action to take if any, and how to implement it are taken by the group. The group of people meets regularly to discuss and learn about issues that concern them, their communities or the wider society. The basis of a learning circle is a dialogue of equals—the give and take of ideas where everyone learns from each other. Sometimes you might hear people criticise someone as 'all talk, no action', but for most of us, talk is fundamental. It's the key way in which we explore all sides of an issue, assess the implications of acting in one way or another and reach a decision on the best way to go in the circumstances.

For over 100 years learning circles have proven an effective and practical method of learning and social change. Community organisations, trade unions, churches and social justice groups have used them to empower their members to make choices and take action. They are one way that people can come to grips with important social and political issues, in their own way and their own time.

One reason for thinking and talking together in a group is that none of us has all the relevant information needed to decide what is best to do about issues that may be very personal. We might

feel very strongly that one option is better than another—and we might have very good reasons for believing this. But there's rarely one right answer. By thinking and talking together, we may be able to work towards a shared judgement about what is the best and most acceptable thing to do in the circumstances.

The basis of a learning circle is a dialogue of equals
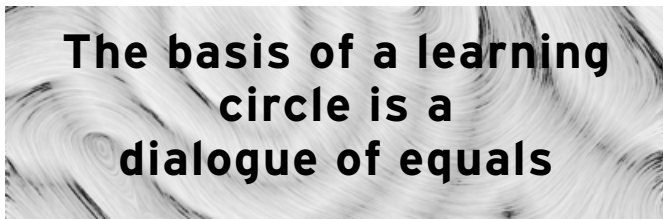
Learning circles are not dependent on teachers or subject experts, although those people may be part of a group. Learning circle material is not a textbook. You don't have to work through it from beginning to end. You can choose to focus on those areas that interest the group most. Some groups may spend a couple of weeks discussing the material in just one module. Participants progress at their own pace, drawing on their own life experiences. The aim of a learning circle is not necessarily to learn a lot of facts or for everyone to reach an agreement. Rather it should provide each person with a chance to increase their understanding of the issues, and develop tools and the confidence to act on their beliefs, with everyone learning something from one another.

The success of a learning circle depends on a number of factors that include:

- all members working together cooperatively
- group members supporting each other by listening to each others' ideas and treating them with respect
- maintaining focus on the issues being investigated
- a willingness to explore ideas that participants may have previously rejected
- members speaking freely without dominating discussion
- members trying to understand the point of view of those they disagree with
- members curtailing feelings of anger and aggression.

The role of the facilitator

The facilitator is vital to the group's success. They make sure that discussion is lively but focused. They model respectful listening and encourage participants to share their knowledge, experiences and opinions. The facilitator should not be the focus of attention nor the hub for discussion, but should offer summaries to assist the group to pressure the issue under discussion. In addition to beginning, ending and keeping sessions on task, the facilitator plays an important role as resource person, by linking the group with people and ideas to complement shared group knowledge.

The following was a guide handed to all members of the learning circles in relation to being a facilitator:

Your main role is to assist the discussion. You are not expected to be an expert on the issues, any more than other members of the Circle. Your most important task is to be organised. Having been through the material beforehand and thought a little about it will help you to be more effective. Your job also includes making sure the group has all it needs for the session. Your most difficult job will be to keep discussion focused on the issues, making sure no one person dominates, and keeping your own opinions back to let the rest of the group have their say.

1. Set a friendly and relaxed atmosphere from the start. Make sure everyone knows each other. Use the first few minutes to decide which activities the meeting will focus on. Check what peoples' goals are for the meeting and review the suggested activities to make sure everyone understands and agrees about how the meeting will proceed.

2. Don't allow aggressive or over-talkative people to dominate. 'Can we hear from someone else now?' or, 'let's go round and see what other people think', can keep it fair.

3. Don't let the group get stuck on improvable 'facts' or assertions. If there is a disagreement over facts, ask how relevant they are to the issue and maybe get someone to find out for the next session.

4. Draw out the quiet people. If you know their interests, this can help.

5. Be an active listener. Try to listen carefully to what people are saying, so you can help guide the discussion. There's nothing worse than a facilitator who is too busy working out his/her own 'speech' to hear where the discussion is in fact heading.

6. Try to stay impartial when there are disagreements. Your role is to further the discussion and draw out the different viewpoints, not to come down in favour of one of them.

7. Don't avoid conflict, but don't let it get personal. Everyone has to feel safe about expressing their views, even if they are unpopular.

8. Don't be afraid of pauses and silences. It probably means people are thinking. Count to ten before trying to answer your own questions to the group.

9. Don't let the group treat you as the expert or the ones with the answers. Throw it back to them. Invite others to comment on what someone has said, even if he/she has addressed the comment to you. Try to encourage 'cross talk', to get people talking not to you, but to each other.

10. Regularly intervene to summarise where you think the discussion has got to. To avoid boredom, don't get stuck on a topic; move onto the next thing if the group isn't interested.

11. Ask the 'hard' questions; point out issues that people are ignoring and help the group examine its own assumptions.

12. Use questions that encourage discussion, instead of yes/no answers: 'Why do you disagree with that point?' rather than 'who agrees/disagrees?'

13. Don't expect the group to reach agreement all the time, so if there are strong differences, just summarise and move on.

14. Close the session with a brief question that each person can answer in turn: 'Let us each summarise in our own words what we gained from this session'. This helps to give the session a 'neat' ending, rather than trailing off. If people make suggestions for improving the process, note them down to help you with the next session. (*www.learningcircles.org.au*)

the major objective was to promote the growth of self esteem

The role of each participant

Everyone in the group has unique knowledge and experience; this is what makes the learning circle interesting. Members have the responsibility of making sure their remarks are relevant. Members should not feel pressured to speak. Social skills and knowledge are developed by communicating with others in the group. Trust and responsibility are built, and these lead to feelings of empowerment and a better understanding of things. The following was a guide handed to all members of the learning circles in relation to being a participant:

The aim of a learning circle is not to learn a lot of facts or attain 100 per cent agreement. It is to deepen each person's understanding of the issues and empower each of you to act on your beliefs. It should be a democratic discussion amongst equals.

1. Listen carefully and actively, making sure the group is hearing what each member has to offer.

2. Maintain an open mind. Just 'sticking to your guns' won't help you or the group to advance anywhere. Feel free to explore ideas you might have rejected in the past.

3. Try hard to understand the point of view of those with whom you disagree. Understanding an opposing viewpoint doesn't mean adopting, or even being sympathetic to it. In fact, it can often make you a better advocate for your own views.

4. Help keep the discussion on track. Don't leave it all up to the facilitator and try to make your own comments relate to the main points being discussed.

5. Speak freely, but don't dominate. If you are a good talker, encourage others. If you tend to be quiet, try to have your say more often.

6. Talk to the group as a whole, not the facilitator. Feel free to ask questions directly to other group members, especially ones who aren't saying much.

7. If you don't understand, say so. Chances are, other people will be feeling the same way.

8. Value your own experience and understanding. Everyone has a contribution to make.

9. Be prepared to disagree. Conflict is healthy and can help a group progress. But focus on the issue you disagree with, not the person.

10. Don't get aggressive, it won't help your case and it might stop other people from putting up good ideas. (*www.learningcircles.org.au*)

Learning in circles—program 2001

The Learning in Circles project was created to develop the reading, writing and oral communication skills of young people between the ages of 14 to 25 who have had negative experiences of learning. This was to be done in a participative learning environment that encouraged social interaction and direct engagement in the learning process. The major objective was to promote the growth of self esteem, feelings of empowerment and community linkages through participation in a learning circle.

These objectives were achieved, along with a number of other unexpected outcomes. The overall success of the program is best illustrated by this comment from one of the participants: 'I like having more confidence and I can say anything I want and get what I'm thinking across. Everyone respects my opinion now, which feels good'.

The pilot project ran for a period of 20 weeks, with learners attending three days per week. They were involved in a program centered on three hours participation per week in a learning circle. The curriculum focused on integrated projects that were

based on themes discussed in the learning circle. One day per week was dedicated to the development of information technology skills that were used to research and communicate their experiences within the learning circle.

The learning circle approach moved away from the more closely controlled 'teacher-centered' style that many of this target group had had negative experiences with. Participants in this program were provided with the opportunity to experience the 'power' of positive learning in a rich learning environment that placed an emphasis on engaging with language and learning in a social context. To cater for these requirements, experiential learning theory and critical learning theory that focus on the relationship between education and social action were drawn upon. The experiential learning theory is centered on involving the whole person in the learning process through reflection and discussion. The interpretive learning and critical learning domain identified by Haabermas, a proponent of critical learning theory, were also utilised. The interpretive learning domain focuses on the learner solving problems through swapping ideas and opinions and reflecting on these. In the critical learning domain learners come to know 'what makes them tick' and what influences them to adopt particular positions, think and react in particular ways. In this kind of learning, participants can learn to see others through themselves, and this assists them to understand the opinions of others.

In keeping with the program's theoretical underpinnings, the coordinator was required to take on the dual role of facilitator and tutor. Facilitation involves a relatively equal relationship between the facilitator and learner that gives the learners considerable control and autonomy. The time spent in the learning circle requires a non-judgmental facilitator who acts as a guide and coach.

An experienced literacy tutor with a background in conducting alternative educational programs for young people facilitated the program. A specialised trainer in conjunction with the program facilitator conducted the information technology component.

Participants were involved with a program based on integrated projects, which led to the attainment of relevant competencies in the CGEA. The curriculum was centered on themes related to issues discussed and studied including anger management, careers, monuments on public land, nudity in public places and acceptance of different religious beliefs in the community. Interest in these was initiated by various letters to the editor in the local press and topics were expanded during discussion within the learning circle. The youth were also involved in research and planning, which took them out into the wider community in order to increase their abilities in the reading, writing and oral

communication streams of the CGEA. This target group needed to be able to 'do' something, rather than just 'know' something. This process enabled them to take ownership of their learning and to acquire skills in the context of achieving something for a purpose.

most participants would not read aloud; now they readily do so
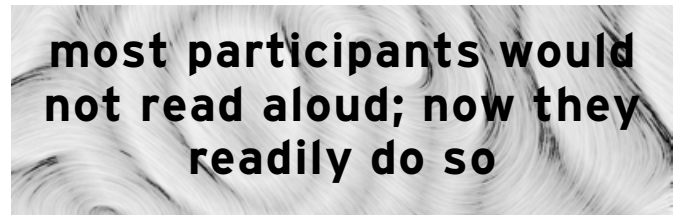
On looking back to the beginning of the project, much was achieved. Most participants would not read aloud; now they readily do so. Some could not get their writing started; now they can begin. Many talked so quietly they couldn't be heard. Now they speak with confidence and are beginning to be assertive. Participation in learning circles has enabled this group of young people to develop feelings of empowerment through gaining the ability to express their opinions eloquently in a public arena. The young people involved have developed the confidence required to reconnect with the community and to re-engage in learning.

Learning circles—Moving Memories and mentors program 2002/3

Moving Memories was a pilot project with the aim of developing reading, writing and oral communication skills in a participative learning environment. It also focused on harnessing young people's existing and developing technological literacy skills. The group of participants was made up of eight young people between the ages of 15 and 20 who had had incomplete and negative experiences of learning, and required support to develop their language and literacy skills. Participants engaged in the project for 20 hours per week over three days, for 20 weeks. The major objective was to promote the growth of community connections, feelings of empowerment and the desire to continue learning through a two-way mentoring system. Older people were assisted to share their stories through the digital medium and also participate in learning circles with the participants.

There were four main components which made up 20-week program: the integration of the reading and writing, oral communication and general options streams of the CGEA into the project; the effective pairing of older mentors from the local community with the participants, to encourage positive development of literacy skills and the sharing of 'life' stories for a few hours once a week; the incorporation of a weekly learning circle to allow participants and mentors quality time, and in a

focused group environment, to further explore issues, experiences and ideas that have arisen during class time; and the main integrated project which is the production of 'digital stories' by the participants, and their mentors, using computer technology and drawing on all their developing skills and key competencies.

The learning circle aspect of the course was titled 'Living and Learning Outside the Square' and its delivery was totally in the hands of the participant and mentor pairings. What really made this program very different to the first pilot program was that learning in circles became a part of the time participants spent with their mentors and the focus was on 'generation-based' discussions. Participants spent half their time with the mentors discussing their lives, as this was necessary to develop and create their mentors' stories in digital format. The other half of the time was spent in a 'learning circle' situation.

Each pair chose a topic of interest to facilitate as a learning circle. Each learning circle was designed to be a one-off and not developed into a continued topic throughout the following weeks. Time was given to the participants, however, to follow up on a topic of interest to write a reflection on and/or an opinionative piece of writing. Mentors and participants would research their topic and find up to three pieces of relevant, stimulating and 'workable' articles, and write a series of questions to engage the other members of the learning circle. These were then photocopied and distributed to all members the week prior to the learning circle with the expectation that the material would be read and thought about. The thinking behind this was that all members of the group had a similar starting point, an understanding of the topic/issue and points of view could be formed with some reference material to back them up.

Mentors and participants would then decide how to introduce the topic in their learning circle, who would summarise the material, how the facilitation would be shared and how the learning circle—and by whom—would be wrapped up. A successful learning circle would depend on how well the partnership could share the load, monitor discussion and reflect appropriately. Learning circles were run weekly throughout the program and were about one hour in length. The topics chosen ranged in subject matter quite dramatically, and also in intensity, but most interestingly, the topics chosen assumed that there would be quite a variance in responses between the generations— there was a desire to spark intense debate from the beginning. It was interesting to observe from the outset, however, the similarities between how the mentors and participants viewed many of the topics; the mentors were surprised by how conservative the participants could be and the participants were absolutely shocked on occasions by the examples, stories and views that many of the mentors held and shared. Some examples of topics included mobile phone etiquette, children who

physically, mentally and emotionally attack their parents, aged care, space exploration and public transport.

Reflecting on the value of the learning circles component of the course, it was wonderful to observe the way all the young participants looked forward to the opportunity to sit around in a circle, with a very mixed group of mentors, both in age and ethnicity, and partake in a discussion with passion, enthusiasm and increasing confidence. When this concept of learning was introduced at the beginning of the program, most of the participants stated clearly that they 'hated' class discussions; that they were waste of time and boring. Their image of what was proposed was that of a classroom, teacher at the front and a topic literally thrown at them. What all participants have been surprised with in this form of learning is that they are able to begin a discussion on equal footing with their peers and mentors at a basic level—experiences aside, all learning circle members began with the same amount of information. They had something to form or base an opinion on and didn't have to sit through at least half a discussion before understanding the topic and having time to formulate a view. They appreciated the way that the facilitator didn't have to be the one with all the knowledge and being a facilitator was not a big and scary issue for them—they were empowered, but not totally 'in' power. This was a major breakthrough for these young people. The mentors also gained so much from their experiences with the young participants. For some of them, being able to share and explore a variety of view points on issues that are community-based and relevant to young people, gave them an opportunity that most people of their age will never have. There was a lot of growth and development by all participants, especially the tutor.

Youth literacy development through learning circles

While developing the learning circle program we searched for a pedagogy, which focused on talking rather than writing, and developing commitment, openness, acceptance and growth. The learning circle framework was selected because it encouraged participants to take risks while sharing knowledge and opinions. This approach does not allow people to be 'put down' and it facilitates the creation of a safe environment where each person is encouraged to feel free to experiment with their ideas. It is very different to the 'school-type learning' that most of the young participants involved in learning in circles had fled from, as it forces learners to take ownership of the program and be assisted by a facilitator, rather than taught by a teacher.

The major findings from both programs include:
• Young people who have elected to leave school early respond well to the opportunity to 'learn how to learn' within an environment that supports their diverse needs and expectations.

They do, however, require added support to help them adjust to the adult learning environment.

- Many of the outcomes achieved in the Learning in Circles program and the Moving Memories program were difficult to measure as they involved personal growth. It is important for the program facilitator to remember that what would usually be considered small amounts of progress, are in fact huge for these target groups.

- Helping young people to develop their literacy skills within this learning context presented the facilitator with a number of challenges, as they were required to take the dual role of guide and tutor.

- The learning circle framework allows young people to experience real and powerful learning because it enables the program to be driven by their interests. It helps them to develop an awareness of the potential for learning while providing them with a concrete application for their improved literacy skills.

- The 'learning in circles' focus on the development of oral communication skills impacted positively on the development of written self-expression.

- The use of multimedia technology is an excellent tool for sharing the learning experienced within the learning circle. The Learning in Circles target group responded very positively to this.

When facilitating a literacy program involving the learning circle philosophy for young people with negative experiences of learning, the following suggestions should be considered in relation to program management and delivery:

- Consideration needs to be paid to the physical learning environment as it has a strong impact on the participant's performance. A 'schoolish' surrounding encourages them to revert to the negative behaviour used in the learning environment they had previously elected to leave.

- The tutor/facilitator needs to be very conscious that they are playing a dual role. When the group is involved in the learning circle, he/she must act as a guide and at other times, he/she is a tutor. Participants need to be made aware of these differences and the reason behind them.

- The program tutor/facilitator must have expertise in dealing with the issues that effect young people. These young participants are attending the program because they have not coped with other forms of learning. This brings a multitude of problems with it. Constantly dealing with these problems can be very demanding and the tutor/facilitator must have regular access to 'debriefing' sessions.

- Strategies used should not be too 'planned' or structured. The tutor/facilitator needs to be flexible to allow the program to be driven by the young people. There needs to be enough space to enable 'red herrings' to be pursued as this allows learners to take control of their learning.

- It is essential that the young people keep reflective journals. These were an excellent form of communication and were particularly useful for all involved in the management of the project. The majority of the group found keeping a traditional written journal very cumbersome. A scrapbook approach using a variety of media maintains interest.

Many young people who have literacy problems or have had negative schooling experiences struggle in the way they express themselves in writing and verbally. Being able to formulate a relevant opinion and express this to a group of people is daunting to most people, but it is also a very important skill to have. Teaching young people to do this, especially if they have problems with general literacy, empowers them and gives them a sense of achievement and confidence— often enough to help them in the other areas of literacy. Learning circles has indeed been a 'tool' to access the drive in many of the young people within the two programs to encourage them to take another positive step to continue their learning in whatever form it takes.

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Practical Matters

In this issue, David Mackay discusses strategies for working with students who present challenges in the classroom, and Sandra Hatzis shows how poetry brings life and language to what may otherwise be just a collection of words.

Tough love—setting boundaries in the learning environment

Alchemists believe you need a strong container to turn lead into gold. What contains the anxiety and aggression of adult learners as many of them face frustration and the risk of humiliation while learning to improve their reading, writing and speaking skills?

Working as a student counsellor alongside a big adult literacy department at the Council for Adult Education (CAE) for eight years has given me plenty of occasions to ponder this question. Given the rising numbers of students with a mental illness or intellectual disability who apply to enter literacy courses, the first significant boundary is access policy. Then, once they're in, some students re-experience primary or early secondary school fears of humiliation and want to give up before they 'fail'. Others don't take turns, harass fellow students or put extreme demands on teachers for emotional support. Sometimes it is hard to keep the 'imploders' on board while the 'exploders' rock the boat.

The following discussion focuses on our more challenging students and some strategies that have worked for us.

The first boundary—saying 'no'

Back in 1995, CAE's literacy program tried to take anyone who applied. In that era teachers occasionally needed a week or two off for 'stress leave'. We had several fights in class too.

Most of the containment of aggressive, demanding or disturbed students was left to their teachers, with the hardest cases being referred to a student coordinator for extra assistance. The teachers were our 'front line' and showed the strain. We only suspended or excluded students if all else, sometimes including a teacher's health, failed.

Since then, we have balanced our commitment to open access with an equal commitment to teachers' welfare and the rights of all students to a safe, positive learning environment. That is, we realised we had been privileging some of our most needy, but difficult, students' access to learning above the rights of their classmates. Now we set a boundary at the point of access.

On enrolment days we have had applicants who can't sit still for two minutes, others who can't make eye contact or who struggle to get any words out. There have been people who frighten the interviewer and others who break down and seem quite desperate, of whom it is hard to assess how they would function in a class. When in doubt about an applicant's capacity to function in a classroom, the first interviewer involves a second interviewer.

Someone who exhibits extreme anxiety or bursts into tears will be offered support and asked for their understanding of what their behaviour is about. They may be asked what other supports they have. Our agenda is to distinguish between a one-off catharsis related to confronting their literacy problem and a possible deep, ongoing need for emotional support which could flood a class. Not that we would reject such a person, but we might help them find some support elsewhere and match them with a teacher who has a particular rapport with such students.

If there's a query about commitment, for example, the person was brought in by a parent, partner, friend or case manager, another appointment may be made to continue their assessment and see if they are motivated to come by themselves.

Where behaviour is bizarre and provocative, attention is drawn to that and compared to our expectations of cooperative classroom behaviour. The person would be asked how they would adapt to a classroom situation. It might be put to them, for example, that their presenting behaviour would distract other students. Can they explain why they can't control it in this interview? Do they have any strategies to control it? Are they willing to address this educational concern of ours? Depending on their responses, they might be enrolled on a probationary basis, referred for counselling or told we can't enrol them until they can control their behaviour.

The most difficult enrolment decisions concern students with whom the interviewer feels threatened or feels a deep sense of disturbance or unease. If the second interviewer feels it too, we try to continue the process until we can articulate our concern to the person or they self-disclose or pull out. We have learned

to trust those intuitive feelings that something needs to be explored further.

Now we have no serious fights in class and less stress leave.

Holding the doubters

In the first few weeks most new students seem to manage their anxiety about failure. But when the first piece of work is due, some disappear or tell their teacher, 'maybe this isn't for me. I don't know if I made the right decision—coming back to school', or more plainly, 'sorry, but I just can't do it'.

For these few, being in a positive learning situation is not enough. A big internal barrier has risen up in their mind and they need more help—more than a teacher is paid to give. Many teachers do give extra one-to-one support to these students. At the CAE they can also refer such a student to me for counselling. It may take several hour-long counselling sessions to confront their demons. The two most common issues that arise, in my experience, are previous humiliation at school or a painful lack of support from family when young. Worries about safety or family conflict can be enough to prevent a child from taking in what is being taught at school. Returning, years later, to the same educational material can replay the emotional states from that period. Often once this is felt, acknowledged and understood, the student can begin to learn again.

Containing demanding students

Adult literacy teachers tend to be very kind and caring toward their students. They know each student has personal reasons for being there—rather than in a vocational training class at TAFE or university where their peers (in their age cohort) are more likely to be. Many of these personal stories are sad or painful, and are still carried with inner or outward scars. Whether it is a student with obvious multiple disabilities, an extremely timid person or someone who can't keep quiet, adult literacy classes can be cauldrons of competing demands. While teachers are conscious of how hard it is for some of their students to come to class, they are responsible for maintaining a positive learning environment while the related personal issues are acted out in class. It takes a particular mixture of kindness, understanding and toughness to do this.

With that in mind, how do we contain difficult students? First, we offer teachers support to debrief, problem-solve and make changes. Second, a student's attendance may be made conditional on fulfilling the conditions of a negotiated learning agreement. Finally, a student may be suspended while placed on an external learning agreement or, as a last resort, 'expelled'.

Support for teachers

Debriefing with each other is a great support for literacy teachers, but sometimes they need extra backup. At the CAE this is available from the literacy manager or the student counsellor.

Sometimes the simple act of describing to another what happened in class can give a teacher a different perspective or enable her (they are almost all 'her' at the CAE—why do so few men teach literacy?) to see how she got hooked into a student's behavioural dynamic. When a student seems particularly anxious, aggressive or weird, it can be useful to explore what feelings this arouses in the teacher. In psychotherapy this is called 'counter-transference'. I might ask: 'What do you feel with that student that you weren't feeling before they come into the room?' A teacher's answer may give us insight into both what that student evokes and possibly what the student wants—which may be quite different.

For example, a student whose aggressive manner evokes fear and a desire to withdraw, or reject him, may fear exactly that response. And no wonder if he regularly provokes it. If the teacher responds to the underlying fear with as much acceptance of the student's work and concerns (but not the aggression) as she can muster, he may drop his aggressive carapace fairly rapidly. Or not.

Similarly the incessant talker, who you feel like strangling, but who seems to *need* all that attention may respond well to kind toughness. She feels isolated because her neediness repels people. If she is confronted kindly with this insight and encouraged to regard listening to others as a genuine act of friendship that they will appreciate, she may see some point in trying it.

It's great when these subtle strategies work, but teachers need to feel backed up by more than just talk. Some of their students have never accommodated to learning in groups. A few need behavioural training to drop bad habits and learn to listen, take turns and speak respectfully to their classmates. This reminds me of 'house-training' my cats. It was not natural for them to use kitty-litter, but they were able to learn how, with help. Some literacy students need forceful help to learn how to be part of a group learning process. To show them this matters to us, and we believe they can do it—we offer students learning agreements.

Learning agreements

The idea of a learning agreement is basically to raise a student's awareness of their own responsibility for their behaviour and its results—for them and others. At CAE we use two kinds of agreement. The general version suits 'house-training' someone who simply lacks awareness of expected classroom behaviour. Here it is:

We don't need to use these often because most teachers get their classes to define acceptable behaviour together in their first few classes. Of the two versions, it is easier to use because it covers most issues and saves drafting a tailor-made version for each student. But it lacks the power of the specific version, which names desired and/or unwanted behaviours for a particular student. Here is a unique sample:

This was strongly worded because we considered the behaviour to be serious misconduct. We try to make the language as accurate as possible and include their behaviour's effects upon others. Usually it goes through two drafts. Preliminary discussion leads to a first draft which is negotiated with the student. It is important to encourage the student to change some terms. If they are wriggling, I might ask, 'which words aren't you happy with?' Negotiation should not allow diminished responsibility—just ensure accuracy and fairness. Often an agreement will include attending a regular review meeting with the literacy manager or me until the goals are achieved.

Learning agreement outcomes

When learning agreements work really well, students take more responsibility for the learning environment in their class. This lightens a teacher's classroom management load and makes teaching more pleasant. Some agreements achieve this.

A lesser, but still useful, outcome can be to break a power struggle or negative dynamic between student and teacher. The written agreement can absorb some of the student's frustration. If the literacy manager or counsellor are involved, they will take on a 'disciplinary' function in the student's mind. They may be resented at weekly or monthly review meetings, leaving the teacher more room to win the student's trust (a good cop/bad cop approach).

Even without backup staff, a teacher working with a written agreement, reviewed regularly outside class time, can separate their disciplinary role from their educative role for that student to some extent. Once a student has accepted a learning agreement, in-class discipline may be possible with a much lighter, confederate touch, for example, a quizzical look or an occasional reminder.

Sometimes, working through a learning agreement with a student will trigger a realisation which seems something like: 'Oh! So it doesn't just happen magically by coming to class and sitting there! You mean there are things I can do in class to improve my learning'. I love those moments!

External learning agreements

This last category of learning agreements are so extreme I've only done two in the last five years. Both involved students with medical illness. One had stress-sensitive epilepsy, the other a mental illness. We were unable to help them function acceptably in class, so we suspended them from the CAE after setting conditions for their readmittance later on.

Each of these students dominated their classes in different ways. They wore teachers out and drove students from their classes. We had a duty to all concerned. Because both students had tried to change we did not want to abandon them. Nor could we keep them without further damage.

So I liaised with their case workers, found psychosocial rehabilitation programs (via VICSERV), and negotiated very specific behavioural targets into their learning agreements. One returned after six months, very focused, and with her behaviour under control. She is now doing very well. The other accepted our decision. She was pleased to be given clear goals and somewhere to go, but we haven't seen her since.

Conclusion

Education has to respond flexibly to the society it supports. Yet a learning centre cannot afford to be an entirely open system. It needs to protect its staff and students from disproportionately needy or destructive individuals. Setting strong, flexible boundaries is how we do this.

Careful selection and placement of students needs to be accompanied by a capacity to reject some applicants. Teachers carry and exemplify the centre's boundaries in every class. The increasing numbers of students with mental illness in adult basic education take this beyond the scope of ordinary teacher education and training. Therefore teachers deserve and need whatever moral or practical support can be provided when they have difficult students. One useful strategy is the learning agreement. It gives responsibility for behaviour back to the student.

Dr William Glasser, author of *Reality therapy* and *Schools without failure*, once claimed all mental illness is a form of irresponsibility. This is debatable. But one useful implication is that it is not useful to let people off the hook because they have a mental illness. In fact by confronting their irresponsibility you may not only help them behave more effectively, but also to feel less ill.

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Poetry in ESL and literacy classes

It all began after an online session with my intermediate ESL group and our focus had been migration stories. One of the students had happened upon a very simply structured poem 'Gabrielinos origin tale'[1], which spontaneously inspired a class poem, following the same simple structure. This is the original and the class poem follows:

Gabrielinos origin tale

I know not if the voice of man
Can reach to the sky;
I know not if the mighty one
Will hear as I pray;
I know not if the gifts I ask
Will all granted be;
I know not if the world of old
We truly can hear;
I know not what will come to pass
In our future days;
I hope that only good will come,
My children, to you.

1 The internet address for the 'Gabrielinos Origin Tale' is *www.indians.org/welker/legend.htm*

I Know Not...

(A class poem with apologies to 'Gabrielino's Origin Tale')
I know not if the harvest will prosper for the farmer.
I know not if the Almighty can read your thoughts.
I know not if she can understand my thoughts.
I know not how to express to you…
I know not how to describe to you…
Whether your feelings are the same for me as mine are for you.
I know not what the future holds for me.
I know not what the future holds for my English, but I will continue indefinitely.
I hope that only peace will come to everyone in the world.

After this session, I showed the other teachers at our centre and one thing led to another, so I was asked to do a session on poetry at the VALBEC professional development day. It was a broad approach to poetry and the different forms I had used in class over the years.

But first, some teachers may well ask, 'why poetry?' True, poetry is often seen as the domain of the erudite, intellectually complex, metrically inflexible and semantically inaccessible. Also, the language of poetry is often thought to be not immediately relevant to our lives, and, because it doesn't help us function in the real world (making a doctor's appointment, negotiating complex oral exchanges, giving and understanding directions or writing a formal letter), it is often avoided in ESL and literacy curricula and left in the too-hard basket. So how would poetry fit into the classroom of the ESL or ALBE student?

Well, education is really about making connections and being able to express them. Poetry is an expression of the inner world where everyday objects, colours, textures, feelings, light and landscape will all speak to us differently, because of the unique frame of reference each student brings to the class.

Moreover, poetry can also be simple in structure and meaning and therefore very accessible to students. The syntax and grammar can be much more flexible, and this can be liberating for the student struggling with a new language.

Another advantage, as in the process writing tradition, is that poetry writing works exceptionally well in the multilevel class, where everyone succeeds, building on their own knowledge,

Using words in a fun way can be motivating, as well: it takes the pressure off. Also, poetry is just one other of the many, varied strategies we can use to inspire students in the classroom.

Thus, at the workshop, I referred to a few forms of poetry I had used in my ESL classroom:

Alliterative adjectives

To be used with dictionary/thesaurus practice, where students find adjectives beginning with the same letter as their names to describe themselves. For example:

> Quintessential Quentin
> Adventurous Alison
> Virtuous Vuong
> Timid Tang

Concrete poems

A series of words is written to take the shape of the object described, for example, snakes or clouds.

Object poems

A little like the language/experience approach to literacy—a hands-on approach where an object is explored with all five senses and then the ideas evoked are written, for example a lemon, an apple.

Then we focused on haiku, a form of Japanese poetry, which usually creates vignettes of landscape, seasons or animals and the feelings evoked through the senses. It is a short poem, almost like a sentence, consisting of 17 syllables arranged over three or four lines. This strict structure can be a focus for the student and help the creative process.

First we read some of the original haiku I had copied for the students/workshop. Here are a couple of these:

> Poppy petals fall
> Softly quietly
> Calmly
> When they are ready.
> > Etsujin

> The rooster, fighting,
> Spreading
> His ruff of feathers,
> Thinks he's a lion!
> > Kikaku

Next, I showed a couple of haiku which had come from student sessions:

> King condor soaring
> Silently circling faultless:
> A sublime death dance. (17 syllables—by Oscar)

> Clucking, caring mother hen
> Spreading fluffy wings
> Over her little chicks. (18 syllables—poetic licence?)

Or (variation on above)

> Fluffy mother hen
> Feeding her hungry chicks
> Quickly catches a worm.

> Two tall, white eucalypts
> Standing silently
> Guarding the ancient dead. (17 syllables)

> Never-changing Mother love

(M. Hanrahan)

Like the earth
Holding good and bad the same. (17 syllables—by Visaka)

Bright hot round sun,
Rising and setting red and golden
Giving us life. (17 syllables—Visaka)

We read some more haiku, discussing the elements we noticed: alliteration to create mood; adjectives and present participles to describe; adverbs to expand actions; and exclamations to evoke emotions. We noticed that there was mostly one image— one single noun and one single verb. So we started with a noun to work on. The other teachers decided on an urban theme. 'City' led to 'traffic'—an obvious connection at Carlton Neighbourhood Learning Centre with the constant river of vehicles connecting the Tullamarine and Eastern Freeways flowing past.

Our next step was to make a list of adjectives with which we could embellish our central idea, 'traffic'. We felt that contrasting this image of fast, noisy vehicles with something pastoral and peaceful might emphasise it. We came up with an elm in the median strip, visible from the portable classroom, and again thought up ideas to describe it. Some of the words we came up with for the cars were: busy, noisy, tooting, peak hour, traffic jam, polluting, ugly, speeding, urban sprawl and vehicles; then for the tree: peaceful, silent, lonely, sad, old, nostalgic, green, leafy, large. To choose the words we wanted— a very flexible and subjective choice—we looked at the number of syllables by counting to see which ones fitted best, then listened to the effect. For example, we could have used 'past' for the last word, but preferred the 'l' sound of 'lost' to go with 'lamenting' below.

This is how it eventually looked:

Racing mindless traffic...
An elm
Stands alone
Lamenting springtimes lost. (17 syllables)

The next ideas were based on one teacher's memory of a goat being slaughtered for a festival, as it hung in a lemon tree. Once again, we focused on the central idea and she chose 'the lemon tree'. In the same way, we all then thought of ideas to embellish it. This resulted in:

> O poor lemon tree,
> Bearing
> Your burden selflessly;
> Festive sacrifice! (18 syllables)

Having gone through the process of creating our own haiku, we all realised how simple it actually was. And the results, without being comparable to some of the original, ancient Japanese pearls of wisdom, were nevertheless valuable and effective expressions. There is a valuable comment in the summing up of 'Poetry in Conversation'—to quote: 'The more you can help your students to connect their own language to that of poetry, the more confidence they will develop as readers and writers of poems.'

So, we can see that it is always useful to introduce diverse stimuli in the ESL and literacy classroom, and that poetry in all its broadest forms can engender enthusiasm, surprise and, what is more, success, for each individual.

Sandra Hatzis has taught ESL for many years at The Carlton Neighbourhood Learning Centre and The North Carlton Railway Station Neighbourhood House.

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Open Forum

We welcome your responses to the articles featured in *Fine Print.* See the back cover for contact details.

There has been a lengthy debate about the short module structure for the CGEA in WA. But as Jim Thompson says, whatever pathway is used, the inherent strengths of the curriculum framework will continue to enhance learning opportunities.

Re-accreditation of the CGEA in WA—the long and the short of it

The Certificates in General Education for Adults (CGEA) have been successfully delivered in Western Australia for the last eight years. For the first two accreditation periods the CGEA was delivered in WA with the same structure as that developed in Victoria. In the third incarnation of the curriculum framework, WA registered training organisations (RTOs) have two alternative structures available to them for delivery of the CGEA. In this article, I will briefly outline the history of CGEA delivery in WA as well as raise some of the emergent issues which led to an accredited CGEA framework with two structures, one containing shorter modules based around learning outcomes.

In 1994, a committee comprising representatives from TAFE colleges, the Department of Justice, state government equity groups and Skillshares worked together to find an appropriate competency-based general education curriculum to meet the needs of adult literacy learners in Western Australia. Curricula developed in other states were reviewed. The CGEA was felt to contain sound theoretical underpinnings and be sufficiently flexible to meet the needs of the wide range of adult basic education learners with diverse purposes and backgrounds in Western Australia.

Initially, CGEA literacy and numeracy modules at the lower levels were going to be piloted and evaluated by the training organisations represented on the committee. However, the absence of an existing suitable curriculum led to immediate full-scale implementation of the CGEA across the state.

How it works

The CGEA is currently delivered by all WA TAFE colleges and Department of Justice education centres, some Secondary School Fast Track centres and senior colleges. Non-government RTOs which have won tenders for the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program also deliver the CGEA in their programs. Initiatives for flexible delivery of the CGEA have been utilised by a range of providers across the state. Self-paced print-based packages have been developed by some RTOs while others use the TAFE Frontiers material. WestOne Services, the West Australian unit, providing a similar service to Victoria's TAFE Frontiers, has developed online Certificate II modules in Reading and Writing, Numeracy and Mathematics and General Curriculum Options. These modules are offered by a number of RTOs. CGEA courses have also been designed to meet the needs of students in vocational or employment preparation contexts.

One of the most important features of the CGEA is the recognition of its equivalence to Year 10 or 11 for the Certificate II or III in General Education for Adults. The certificates provide alternative pathways for entry into a wide range of TAFE courses. The WA police force, the fire and emergency services authority and the Australian Defence Forces recognise the Year 10 equivalence of the CGEA Certificate II for adults who apply for entry into their training academies.

Another key feature of CGEA delivery in WA has been the establishment of a statewide moderation network. The network has operated consistently since 1995. Many of its features and much of its documentation have been adapted by other study areas to meet the requirements of the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF).

Greater flexibility

The improved changes in structure and content of the second accredited version of the CGEA Framework (1996–2001) have enabled teachers and learners to develop more flexible programs. Delivery of the second version commenced in WA in 1997. The CGEA continued to be delivered in diverse contexts across wide ranging programs. However, a number of trends were emerging for some learners and providers which would influence how the CGEA was delivered. The length of the modules was becoming

a significant issue for some programs in TAFE colleges and prison education centres.

CGEA literacy and numeracy modules used to support students enrolled in vocational programs were often long, costly and difficult to contextualise. The introduction of training packages required a different approach to supporting students. Training package delivery became a requirement of the Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) program. It was not appropriate for the CGEA or other accredited general education curricula to be delivered in this context. The time required to deliver CGEA modules proved problematic in WELL programs when compared to the delivery time required by most vocational units.

Lack of completion of modules was also becoming an issue. Many adult literacy and numeracy students juggle study with family, work or personal issues. Teachers indicated that a significant number of students completed part of the course in one semester and then left because of family and other commitments. When they returned to study, they were given no formal credit for their achievements and needed to repeat areas they had already covered. On some occasions this can lead to feelings of frustration by students and teachers.

A consistent lack of completion of modules was also showing up in statistics generated by the WA Department of Training. This was of particular concern because the adult literacy/ESL and access and bridging program areas are amongst the most heavily funded by the department. The partial completion generated a funding issue because RTOs received funding for the full 80 hours rather than for the time the students were actively involved in their CGEA course. An argument was presented that literacy funds would be better spent on students who were active participants in courses rather than those who had essentially left.

Departmental evaluation

In 2001, the Department of Training (now Education and Training) began a project to evaluate the effectiveness of CGEA delivery in WA. It was timely because the curriculum was about to be reviewed for accreditation in Victoria. It also provided an opportunity for issues initially identified through the statewide CGEA Inter-regional moderation network to be more closely examined. The Department conducted consultations and focus groups across the state with RTOs. Modes of delivery, needs of students and teachers, contexts of delivery and success rates were all taken into consideration. A separate survey of students was also undertaken. At the time of writing (April 2003) the report has not yet been released.

At least two significant issues raised by teachers and coordinators through the West Australian moderation network were fed back to the Victorian re-accreditation project.

Whilst the curriculum framework enabled teachers to develop literacy and numeracy courses to meet the needs of their students, the use of the CGEA would be enhanced by increased possibilities for integration with other areas. This was already being considered by the re-accreditation project team. It has been addressed in the latest CGEA by the introduction of electives from training packages or other accredited curricula (for example, the Certificates in English Language Literacies).

The second issue was the investigation and development of a curriculum structure to address the lack of completion of modules by a significant number of students. A suggestion to consider breaking down the 80 hour modules into shorter modules was referred to the Victorian project team. This suggestion was not incorporated into the re-accredited CGEA. The Victorian consultations indicated that many learners often required more than 80 hours to achieve the learning outcomes. Concerns were also expressed that the key underpinning principles of using an integrated approach across the streams, and learning literacy and numeracy skills in different contexts would be compromised. The CGEA was re-accredited in Victoria with 100-hour modules for Reading and Writing and Numeracy and Mathematics.

Raising issues

There was strong support for continued delivery of the CGEA in Western Australia but the issues of the increased module hours and an appropriate structure for students who only completed part of the modules without any recognition needed to be addressed.

Consultations with key stakeholders including the WA Moderation Network were held and presentations were made by staff from the Department of Training. The outcome was the re-accreditation of the CGEA (2001–2006) in WA with two significant variations. The first is that Reading and Writing, and Numeracy and Mathematics will continue to be funded for delivery as 80 hours.

The second variation is the accreditation of two alternative structures for delivery in WA. One structure is the same as the Victorian delivery module with 80 hours instead of 100 hours. The second contains shorter modules based around learning outcomes in Reading and Writing, Numeracy and Mathematics and Oral Communication, for example, Literacy for Self- Expression I (20 hours), Numeracy for Personal Organisation I—Time and Money (15 hours), Oracy for Practical Purposes I (27 hours).

The General Curriculum Options stream continues to be delivered as 80-hour modules. Students still need to complete all of the required learning outcomes/modules to receive credit for a full module and they need to meet the appropriate curriculum requirements to receive a certificate.

Learning in prison

The prison education system has enrolled virtually all of their CGEA students in the short module structure because it enables learners to receive recognition for partial achievement of a full module. As prisoners move between centres or between education and other commitments they are able to retain their CGEA credits without having to repeat sections. A regional TAFE college is also using this structure for delivery of the CGEA to students in the justice system.

In general, TAFE colleges have limited student enrolments in the short module structure in first semester, 2003. There are concerns that more work needs to be done on the integration of learning outcomes within and across streams when students are enrolled in a number of short modules. There is also the potential for greatly increased paperwork and administrative time required when students are enrolled in four literacy modules, five or six numeracy modules and three oracy modules. One campus decided to trial enrolling all of their students in the alternative structure,

using a sequential model, for example, a literacy module being completed every five weeks. The paperwork has been weighty and a different system for roll creations will be considered in second semester. Another college is considering using the structure for enrolling indigenous students who move in and out of the learning centre. It may provide an option for more immediate recognition of their achievements.

There has been lengthy debate over the merits of the short module structure for the CGEA in WA. No doubt this debate will continue as teachers and managers explore the options it offers. The ways in which students are enrolled and given enrolment options to devise courses to meet their needs will determine whether the structure is successful and whether the integrity of the curriculum is maintained. Whichever pathway is used, the inherent strengths of the CGEA curriculum framework continue to enhance learning opportunities for West Australian learners

Jim Thompson, the CGEA Coordinator for Western Australia, has managed the WA Coordination Unit since 1994. With the support of the WA Department of Education and Training he coordinates the WA CGEA Moderation Network. Jim is based at Challenger TAFE, is currently President of the Australian Council for Adult Literacy and can be contacted at *thompj@fremantle.training.wa.gov.au*

Foreign Correspondence

In the UK, a controversial campaign focuses on the shame and embarassment of literacy problems.

Gremlins and literacy—the art of balancing humour with menace

Introduction (by Sarah Deasey)

The Skills for Life campaign, launched in March 2001, is an initiative funded by the UK Department for Education and Skills. The aim of the £1.6 billion campaign is to raise the basic skills levels of 1.5 million adults in the UK by 2007. The advertising uses a highly personal, visual approach that involves the shock tactic of focusing on the embarrassment and shame that literacy problems are perceived to cause. This embarrassment is represented by Gremlins. These are painted, comical, humanoid characters with pointy ears and noses and exaggerated facial expressions. The Gremlins are designed to pop up, or lurk, in the workplace, the home, or in the community, whenever a difficulty with literacy appears.

At the 2002 ACAL Conference in Sydney, Mary Hamilton showed us images from the Gremlins campaign when she talked about the contradictions of government policies that pronounce success for all, but at the same time use the language of exclusion. In last month's Foreign Correspondence we brought you an article by Mary Hamilton and Iffat Shahnaz about the role of the mass media in promoting adult literacy programs.

The following article by Stuart Barnes of the high-profile St Luke's Advertising agency is published on UK's Department for Education and Skills website and we reprint it here for *Fine Print* readers to give some insights into the way the theme of the campaign was devised. At this stage we have no outside research into the success of the campaign, but a number of teachers in the UK are disturbed by the negative images of the Gremlins. We invite your comments. In your experience, what has brought your literacy students to class? What role does threat play in promoting adult learning?

Why Gremlins? (by Stuart Barnes)

The 'Get On' campaign to promote awareness and take-up of adult basic skills learning opportunities was the result of careful research by St.Luke's, the advertising agency.

The research showed that people with poor reading, writing, spelling or numbers skills felt that it was their own personal issue which only *they* could fix and only when *they* felt it was right for them. They couldn't be told or even encouraged to learn, either by advertising, by an organisation, and often not by friends or family.

Getting by

Most of the people spoken to in the research had elaborate ways of coping, of hiding their lack of skills or avoiding situations where they might be needed. They did not see their poor skills as a defining characteristic of their everyday life, and they did not generally think poor literacy and numeracy skills limited the scope of their social or family life or their work.

So why should they bother doing anything about it? Most felt that they 'got by' in life quite adequately without having to risk going back into learning.

Evidently, the big shift in attitudes the campaign needed to create was this: to make people want to stop getting by and to start getting on.

How to motivate?

Basic skills problems are a very personal issue, affecting different people in very different ways. It is impossible to describe problems or incentives that all non-learners (people not engaging in any numeracy or literacy learning) can relate to. Demonstrating the benefits of improving skills did not convince them—either they did not think they could learn or they couldn't see the relevance the benefits had to their everyday lives.

It was difficult to find a common theme about benefits that would get through to everyone.

Frustration and embarrassment

However, we did find common ground in the emotional response to the lack of skills.

Nearly everyone we spoke to with poor literacy or numeracy had the same emotional response. They felt very frustrated with themselves when they were unable to complete tasks they thought they should be capable of. They were scared of being found out and were afraid of the severe impact on their self-confidence that would result. This is where the idea of the Gremlins came from.

The Gremlin personifies this emotional response as a third party. It appears when you are confronted with a task involving reading, writing or numbers. The Gremlin is the thing which stops you being able to do things—it undermines your confidence, it mocks your mistakes and always threatens to embarrass you.

Blame the Gremlins

Seeing the problem in this way, as separate from their real selves, makes it easier for people to control their feelings. The approach removes any sense of personal failing—'it's not my fault, it's the Gremlins'.

Conventional wisdom suggests that poor literacy is a very sensitive subject and any advertising should be serious and make people feel better about themselves. But our research showed that the humour of the Gremlins was necessary in order to engage the viewer and make the problem seem less serious.

And the humour must be balanced with menace. Research showed that the only way of motivating non-learners was to directly confront them with how uncomfortable it is to deal with poor literacy and numeracy.

So those are the reasons for using the gremlins. In addition, they are a simple way of reminding people of the campaign message. They and the telephone number can go into small discrete places, such as on the backs of bus tickets and in TV listings.

Empathy

The Gremlin campaign is very direct, and sometimes feels quite disturbing. But, possibly because the idea came about through discussion with non-learners, we've found that, although some providers feel uncomfortable, people with basic skills problems respond well to the message.

They appreciate the campaign's empathy with the difficult emotions they have to deal with on a daily basis, and are able to start talking more openly about getting rid of their own gremlins.

The response to the advertising we have had so far speaks for itself. It made lots of people pick up the phone and make the first move towards a better life.

This article and images have been reproduced from *http://www.dfes.gov.uk/get-on* with permission from the Department for Education and Skills, UK.

Sarah Deasey is an adult literacy teacher and coordinator at the Carlton Neighbourhood Learning Centre, and a member of the Fine Print Committee.

Join the Editorial Group and get your name in (Fine) Print!

Fine Print's mandate is to keep VALBEC's members informed about activities and developments in the areas of adult literacy and language research, project work, policy work and administrative practice. **Fine Print** aims to promote informed debate within the field on theoretical, methodological and policy issues.

VALBEC is looking to sustain and develop **Fine Print** and invites interested people to join the Editorial Group. Exciting opportunities exist for people to serve as an Editorial Group member. If you are interested, or know someone who may be interested, past and present Editorial Group members would welcome the chance to talk about their experiences.

Typically the Editorial Group:

◆ Meets twice each edition to identify possibilities for articles/themes/writers in collaboration with the Commissioning Editor

◆ Follows up writers from time to time as requested or volunteered

◆ Liaises with the Commissioning Editor in between meetings, usually by email, to assist in filling gaps or shortfalls in planned copy

◆ Reads feature articles from time to time to assist in assessing suitability

◆ Writes/assists in writing the editorial from time to time.

Overall, the Editorial Group needs to have:

◆ Experience and knowledge of the language and literacy field in Victoria, and perhaps some knowledge of the national and international fields

◆ A sound understanding of the issues and challenges facing language and literacy practitioners in Victoria

◆ Good networks and contacts within the field

You may be able to contribute some or all of these skills and experiences!

Email fineprint@valbec.org.au to be linked up with an Editorial Group member to chat to...

What are the innovative teaching strategies that assist low-level literacy students?

Olympic Adult Education has received funds from the Australian National Training Authority to investigate *What are innovative teaching strategies that assist low-level literacy students?* These strategies refer to the activities that are used in a class to assist students to learn.

As a literacy tutor I have become aware of the need to identify what works and what doesn't work for low-literacy students. I believe that literacy tutors have a wealth of information and experience that needs to be acquired and shared. This information will not only benefit teachers but also students. Subsequently this research attempts to acquire information on teacher's experiences, record these experiences through a teacher survey and focus group sessions, and evaluate these strategies in the classroom for a term period. The findings will then be documented to produce a practical publication that can be used by teachers as a useful tool.

I am seeking responses from teachers who teach the Certificate of General Education for Adults introductory level, National Reporting System level 1, or the Cell foundation, to fill out a survey. The survey takes about 15–20 minutes to complete and can be done electronically. Your cooperation is vital in ensuring that the needs of low-literacy students are met.

In addition, I will select teachers from those who complete the survey to participate in a focus group session in July, and then trial the strategies and maintain a reflective journal for a term. Teachers who participate in the focus group will be paid. Please contact me for further information.

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Beside the Whiteboard

Many teachers in the ALBE field have questions about teaching literacy to people with intellectual disabilities. Michael Chalk talked with experienced practitioner Narelle Struth at Preston Reservoir Adult Community Education (PRACE). This is an edited version of their conversation.

Could you tell us about the range of work you're doing here at PRACE?

Currently I'm running a CGEA course for people with intellectual disabilities here at PRACE. It's four hours per week.

And the group isn't necessarily work-focused is it?

No, it's not at all work-focused. A number of people in the group want to develop vocational skills and are doing work training at other agencies. We tend to do a little bit of vocational stuff but not much. No, it's very much literacy-based and interest-based stuff.

In terms of the main issues that come up in the classes, learning language and literacy, what sort of issues do you get coming up?

Learning issues? I suppose one of the biggest issues would be retention of skills and strategies. I find that we will spend two hours working on a particular set of skills in a session, and by the end of that two hours everyone can do it and then we come back the next week and it's gone.

So I find that quite an issue and also concentration span. We have to do lots of short activities and change it around quite a lot, but also the fact we can't follow through with something that takes quite a few weeks to complete.

For example, if we start off a particular theme will get halfway through it people will be doing lots of activities around it, and everybody will be going, 'I'm bored, I'm bored, this is boring we've already done that'. So I find that quite an issue, because I find that we chop and change a lot.

So I'm always pulling in different things, and changing things around, and it probably looks—if anyone looks through my weekly sessional notes—that we just do whatever I feel like on the day but that's not true, that's absolutely not true, (laughter) there's a strategy to it, really honestly. There's a method in the madness!

So what I find is that trying to keep people's interest maintained, and yet do enough repetition in order for skills to be developed,

is probably the main issue. And that retention of skills—once I think it they've got the hang of something, not losing at the next week. I haven't figured away of getting around yet.

Do people remember what it was they were studying? Just not how do it?

Oh, absolutely! In fact they've got phenomenal memories! It's the skill involved.

For example, we were doing lots of numeracy-based stuff in first term, and then one guy in the class who honestly didn't get just very simple stuff. I can't remember what were doing—oh, money—and it was moving the decimal point using a calculator and changing the calculator value into a money value, so knowing where to put the decimal point to make it dollars and cents. We worked on this for quite a few weeks—doing other things in between of course—but this guy would get it, if I sat down with him and we went through the method. We would have ten sums and by the tenth one, he could get it. Then he could do another ten independently that was fine, and we got it—but by the next week, it was gone! And so you have to start right back at the start again.

Now, that's not to say that everyone was like that, but that's an example I suppose of the difficulty and things. Like, you might teach word recognition skills, word endings, like -ing, or -er, or where do you put an -e for plural, and a lot of the time they forget, or they don't really comprehend the rules or the logic behind what they're doing.

They might learn one word, but they're not necessarily going to generalise the skill that taught them to be able to do that word, into everything else—not seeing the pattern. So I find that a difficult challenge, as far as progression of skills and building skills goes. This is very much a generalisation—you know that don't you?

Yes.

Because there are some people who are very very good at it, and understand it very well. They are often the people who had very good grounding in primary school and then maybe their disability was picked up later, or maybe they had interrupted schooling at

a later stage. But the people who went straight into a special school, or who had interrupted schooling—because, often people with intellectual disability have lots of associated health issues as well—so that early primary school stuff, which is forming the foundation of our understanding of language…a lot of my students don't have that foundation, and if they're missing that, I find it quite difficult.

So, for the students who've got that, you can build on it, and they understand those basic things, but the students who haven't got that—it can be quite challenging.

So if somebody's not retaining from week to week, does there come a point where they will retain it?

I think so, yes. Because that that guy I was telling you about—not with the numeracy stuff because I don't think he'll ever get the numeracy stuff—but with some of the literacy skills, he is able to generalise. Things he couldn't generalise 12 months ago that he's practised enough, he's retaining now— so I do think repetition, repetition, repetition is extremely important, and consistency in the way you teach things is really good I find.

What are your most reliable strategies for dealing with difficult situations?

I'm not sure what you mean by difficult situations, if you mean classroom management social skills-type situations for learning situations, but the strategies are very similar: be very consistent, have very clear expectations, establish very clear boundaries, what your role is and what your role isn't, and reinforce regularly.

Particularly around social skills, if people continually overstep lines or boundaries, more if there's stuff going on between people in class—just being really clear and consistent—actually letting people know very regularly what the expectations are, as far as their participation in class, and their relationship with other people, and what your role is and those sorts of things. So, it's a lot more directive than it probably would be in a class without people with disabilities, but not having had much experience in classes without people with disabilities it's hard to compare.

But those things I think are very important and I also think, as far as strategies go, lots of communicating regularly with support workers can be really beneficial. And using material from people's lives, so for example people who are doing vocational training. We've got a couple of people who are doing some work experience at a recycling station, so we're tying in some of the materials on recycling which recently arrived. And we'll probably do a site visit, also using really practical things that are relevant in people's lives.

I've tried using irrelevant things (laughter); I've tried using hypotheticals, for example, when we were looking at train timetables. Because we've done quite a lot of things on public transport, and using public transport, and if you use a hypothetical situation and say how long will it take to get from here to there, they'll say, 'Why would we wanna go there?'

So, I've found that, if you're going to use those practical skills, you actually have to plan an event to work towards, that ties in with where you're going, so it makes it real. Or I've got people who say, 'Why would I wanna learn how to read a timetable? I've just got really a good memory. Why would I want to use a diary?'

I've been trying to get my class to learn to use a diary and write things in their diary regularly, and you know. I've got one woman in the class to totally resists it, because she says 'I know when my appointments are—why do I need to write it down?' and I say, 'Because you're coming to a literacy class, and that's what we're learning.' (ironical laughter.)

No—but you know what I mean? She won, of course—because I'm very flexible as well—flexibility is very important: consistency, clear boundaries and lots of flexibility.

In terms of the hypothetical situation, if they were studying a hypothetical person—like a case study—would that make a difference?

Yeah that's a little bit easier, but we would still get all the discussion around, 'Why would you go to Northland when Epping is much better? And doesn't he know that it's cheaper at Epping?' It's actually quite good critical stuff.

I've also got a couple of students who don't believe they are working unless they're doing a worksheet or doing questions and answers or something. They don't actually see a discussion as a valid use of class time—they think we're just having a chat, which we are, but…that's another issue—trying to get people to recognise that literacy is more holistic than just reading and writing.

And to see that there are different ways of learning?

Absolutely. There's very much the idea, once again from school, that school involves taking notes, and doing work in their workbooks that they can take home. It took me a year to get them out of the habit of asking for homework because I wasn't going to give it to them. I attempted to initially, but then I didn't want to correct it (laughter).

I think what had happened in the past was that whoever had them, had had this endless supply of maths worksheets, that they

would hand out as a homework thing. But I didn't see the point of handing out endless numbers of sums, if that wasn't what we were doing in class and it wasn't something that was going to teach them very much. So I stopped doing that, but it took six months of training the class to stop asking me.

Thinking about learners who are at the beginning levels of literacy awareness and who have intellectual disability, is there any hope for progress? Is a literacy class the best place for them, or are there more suitable programs?

Yes and no. I think sometimes it can be really difficult for someone, if they don't have the basic understanding of the alphabet, and they don't understand word formation—that is, that letters make up a word—then I think that a literacy class is not an appropriate place for them to be, if they're an adult. Because, if they haven't got those skills and they're 25 or 40 years old, I think it's unfair to place them in an environment where it's very unlikely they're going to develop those skills at that age. I think there's a lot of practical things they could be doing, where they still could be developing survival literacy skills, like sight word recognition and environmental reading skills, that don't involve that basis of language.

So for people at that level, I probably think that a community access program or a vocational training program or something like that, that's got a literacy component in it, would be extremely useful. But coming to a classroom when literacy is the focus, I don't think would be very helpful. We did have a student in this class when I first started who didn't have those basic skills—and everyone else in the class did—and he was constantly frustrated, and he always felt inferior to the others. Maybe inferior is the wrong word, but he used to get frustrated, he didn't get it, and he couldn't do what anyone else in the class could do, and I felt that was really unfair on him.

So I devised a lot of things for him, but it set him aside—set him up as different to the rest of the class, so he couldn't do the work that they could do, and he really didn't—he was probably in his early 40s, he really couldn't. I couldn't imagine that he was going to understand the concepts that he needed in order to develop those literacy skills. And yet, this was a guy that functioned brilliantly in the community—lived independently, handled his own finances, could get anywhere around the city on public transport, because he's developed incredible survival skills. So, very skilled guy, he just didn't have the literacy skills, but did he need them? He knows what K-Mart is, and he knows what a danger sign is, and all the signs he needs to know in his work environment. He has all those functional literacy skills, but as far as sitting down and writing a shopping list—what

would be the point? He recognises the packages anyway? (laughter.)

Which leads into our next question—is the CGEA useful for this kind of learner? Initially I was thinking the sort you've said wouldn't fit in a literacy class.

I think if the CGEA is used with a practical application—it's very flexible within a horticulture or work-skills program—it could be useful, but if they're below that foundation level of the CGEA, then I think it's setting people up to fail a little bit. Because it's too 'up here' (gestures up high) for people who don't have an understanding that 'a equals apple'. I think the expectations are far too great, and the CGEA probably isn't appropriate.

For my class here at PRACE, I think the CGEA is a fantastic tool. I really like it, because we can do pretty much anything we want, and you can match learning outcomes to almost anything you can think of that you do. I really like the general curriculum options as well for that reason—that they're flexible. You can say 'Well what do you want to do?' and you can design a task around whatever it is—whatever topic it is, it's irrelevant, you can fit it in somewhere. So, I find it quite a useful tool. It's also useful in that if you're not feeling particularly creative, you can go back and look at it and think, oh what can we do around 'practical purposes', and brainstorm something from there…so it can be used either way. I know some people don't like it, but I really do.

I really like the fact that with the new certificate that students who are at the higher level of that foundation bit can achieve a certificate—because I don't think in the past that they could possibly have ever ever ever achieved a certificate. None of my students would have ever. Whereas, I reckon there's a couple of students—if they wanted do, and I'm not sure they do—it's now within their grasp. For people with intellectual disabilities, the possibility of achieving a certificate can be quite a big incentive sometimes.

Particularly if they're doing vocational study or if they want to get a job, having that piece of paper can be quite a useful thing, as far as showing that they can work at things and that they've developed those learning skills. The other thing I really like about the new certificate is that you can incorporate modules from other certificates to make up a certificate. I find that really exciting. With my work skills training background—there's a couple of certificates that are designed especially for people with intellectual disabilities, like the Certificate of Work Education and the Certificate in Transition Education, and some of my students already have those certificates. So for them to have achieved those certificates, they could take a module that they've achieved from there, add it to the CGEA, and be able to make

up a certificate. Or, there could be stuff they'd really like to do—it's a really good link into TAFE courses. Both those courses are taught at NMIT. So it could be really useful as a bridge from PRACE to TAFE, or just as a way of students expanding their horizons. It's become a much more useable and practical certificate for students with a disability.

How do you cope with learners who have multiple disabilities?

Do you mean people with a dual disability such as intellectual and psych? Or physical disabilities?

The dual mix of intellectual and psychological disabilities.

Once again, it's hard to generalise. A lot can depend on how well you establish those boundaries and expectations at the start of the program. And also how well you communicate with the support worker, or agency. Hopefully they have got a support agency—if they haven't, that can be a little bit difficult. But if someone's got a psych disability and an intellectual disability, probably those principles of repetition, and really clear boundaries and expectations become incredibly important, as opposed to just very important.

So, setting some really firm guidelines and expectations, and establishing your role early is important so that the person comes in with the expectation that they're in a literacy class; that they're not in a counselling session, for example. That there are expectations of behaviour, that we have policies and procedures and people with disabilities can understand those policies and procedures just as well as any other person without a disability can. In fact, often more so, because often they've come from very regimented lifestyles, particularly if they've come from either an institution, or a supported accommodation option—they've led very structured lives, in many cases—where there are very clear rules that they live by.

What we're doing is building on that, so that they know that at PRACE there's an expectation of behaviour, this is what we expect, and whether or not you have a psychiatric illness is irrelevant to how you behave towards other people or how you behave in a classroom environment. That's how I cope, by being a really hard-line person (laughter).

Obviously there are times when people are in an acute stage of illness, and that is when you need to be really observant, and recognise signs that something's escalating, and communicate with the support worker, suggest that it might not be appropriate, or that something needs following up.

I've got a guy in one class who has Asperger's Syndrome, which isn't a psychiatric illness, but there's a lot of behaviours associated with his particular condition. Whenever there's any changes to routine, or he's got a lot of different support staff coming in, it's really obvious the way he behaves in the classroom is very different. Basically, when I observe that things are not quite right with him, I don't wait until we have an incident—we never have, I'm sure we haven't been far off—I would immediately get onto the unit manager, and say, 'this person's behaviour is not great, we need to do this, this and this'.

Being consistent, once again jumping in early, being observant and using incentives can be really useful as well, so that if people's behaviour is appropriate for five minutes, and that's a struggle for them, you can give them some sort of reward, as a positive reinforcement strategy. Then you use consequences if you have to (laughter), but incentives and rewards are a nicer way of doing it. It's the carrot-and-stick thing.

There are a whole lot of issues around psych and intellectual disabilities—a lot of the time it can be quite difficult to manage. If you're clear from the onset and someone isn't behaving the way they should be, then at least you have a way of addressing it.

In terms of placing learners with intellectual disabilities in mainstream classes in adult community education, do you have any position?

Again, yes and no. Ideally and theoretically, of course, segregation should never have happened initially, two centuries ago or whenever it happened that we locked people up for being feeble-minded or whatever you want to call it. However I think we've created a monster for ourselves in our society. I think there are pros and cons for integration. Obviously if it's well supported and well resourced, I think it can be extremely beneficial. I would say there are heaps of classes here at PRACE that are very effectively integrating people with intellectual disabilities and psych disabilities into the classes now, without any issue—maybe with some issues (laughter). On the whole the classes work very smoothly and it's not a problem.

Sometimes practically, it depends on people's social skills, which don't necessarily go hand-in-hand with their level of disability. You could have somebody with a very mild intellectual disability, who socially is not going to fit well into a mainstream environment because their behaviour is going to prohibit them from integrating well. They're going to be more socially isolated because the other people in the class aren't going to accept them because they're constantly picking their nose, or putting their hand down their pants or asking people about their boyfriends. Those sorts of things can be quite prohibitive I think.

As I said before, coming to adult literacy classes is as much about socialising and developing social networks as it is about learning literacy skills. So if people are coming and they're being rejected by other people in their class, I think that can be quite damaging to people's self esteem. It isn't necessarily a very positive experience, so it might put people off wanting to come. Whereas a class like mine—the social skills development is fantastic, and that's one of the things that is a really positive outcome that I observe all the time: people's social skills are constantly improving I believe and their ability to negotiate with each other and tolerate differences. But that's happening in a very structured environment. I think if you were going to have a group of people with intellectual disabilities in a mainstream class, then there needs to be adequate supports and resourcing to make it effective.

If you put someone with a disability into a mainstream class with a support worker, that can make it worse sometimes—not necessarily, it depends on the support worker. Once again, that person is set up as being someone different, and it very much depends on how much time they're taking from the teacher. If they're getting all of the attention and constantly needing behavioural support, or their support worker is constantly having to drag them over to the side and say, 'Listen, this is how you behave in an adult class,' it can really set them up to not do very well in the mainstream environment. Ideally, if it's done well, and I think it can be done well, it can work really well.

One example: I used to support a group of clients going to a yoga class, and I think this has happened a number of times. It started off as a mainstream class, but it ended up as a class for people with intellectual disabilities, because everyone in the class would attend for the first two weeks and then not come back. The reason was social skills. It was nothing to do with the person's level of disability. There were people with disabilities there whose behaviour was impeccable. They listened, they were quiet, they followed instructions. There were people whose level of disability was very mild, but their behaviour—they'd be farting and laughing out loud in the middle of things, talking when they were supposed to be listening, and not following instructions. That's what impacts negatively I think.

So, there needs to be a bit of give and take as well. People without disabilities need to be a lot more welcoming and accepting of people with disabilities. And people with disabilities have to improve their act as far as the way they behave. If they want to be accepted then they need to understand they actually have to

act in a particular way, as we all do, and that we adapt our behaviour according to our environment. That we may act differently in an adult environment than we do at home or at school—that's a learned experience. If you've got a segregated environment, it's hard to learn that sometimes.

Finally, perhaps the most challenging question, what is there about your work that brings you joy?

Am I allowed to say the pay? That's not true—it's not enough! (laughter)

As I said before, that social skills development—I find that really rewarding, particularly as my other work is around human relations, sex education and social skills. I really encourage and support the development of social skills in the group. I've observed with a number of the students in this class, socially they've come ahead in leaps and bounds. One person—the person with Asperger's—while on a day to day level does not give me joy, in an overall sense, when I look at him two and a half years ago and couldn't last more than five minutes, to now we haven't had one incident since he's been here. He can last two hours with a support worker going off and doing shopping while he's here. For him, that's the most enormous achievement, probably of his life. Whilst he annoys other people in the class a little bit, the fact that he is accepted as part of the class, I think that gives me joy. That sense of his personal achievement and watching that growth occur, socially.

The other thing I suppose is seeing people's skills develop—it's very exciting. Once again this person— you should have seen him a year ago trying to operate a computer mouse—it was quite comic (laughter), but terrible for him, so frustrating. Now I can say 'click on that' and he can do it. He still has quite an interesting style, but he's overcome his frustration to a point. He can achieve things that, when I first started with him on the computers, I would have thought were unachievable for him. Other people in the class, who were really fearful of using the computer, and fearful of trying new things, are much more flexible in what they'll do. I'm not sure it equates to joy as such, but definite satisfaction!

Thank you very much, Narelle, for sharing your time and your thoughts.

You're welcome.