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Adult Education in  
 the Community

# Contents

page

## features

### **The Power of 'e': Extending the 'E' in ACE**

3

*By Delia Bradshaw*

An educational evolution has been redefining our understanding and practices of ACE. The name of this transformation is e-learning.

### **Groping towards our Field**

9

*By Rob McCormack*

Raising fundamental questions regarding the very nature of our field.

### **Strengthening Family Literacy Practices: Experiences of the Family Literacy Project, KwaZulu Natal, South Africa**

12

*By Snoeks Desmond*

Detailed insights into the South African-based Family Literacy Project.

### **Never too early—Assisting ESL students on the pathway to their careers**

15

*By Margaret Hanrahan*

Encouraging students to think about, research and plan for their future careers.

## regulars

### **Practical Matters**

19

Mary-Ann Tonini and Sue Neale, together with Diane Walker, reflect on the ACE Capability Building Project, via their involvement in the Community of Practice initiative.

### **Technology Matters**

22

Julia Hanna shares some practical ideas for teaching Information Technology to ALBE students, with vastly different levels of computer skills.

### **Beside the Whiteboard**

24

We feature a profile of Amber McLeod, a teacher based in regional Victoria, currently working at the Education Centre Gippsland.

### **From Over the Border**

26

Alex Williams, a literacy tutor working at the Alice Springs Correctional Centre, offers some insights about the challenges, limitations and joys of working within a custodial setting.

### **What's Out There**

28

Rosie Wickert reviews, *Reading the Fine Print: a history of the Victorian Adult Literacy and Basic Education Council (VALBEC) 1978–2008*, by Beverley Campbell. Michael Chalk shares his thoughts on Digital Literacies: concepts, policies and practices, edited by Colin Lankshear & Michele Knobel, while Nic McLean, Julie Palmer and Tricia Bowen review some teaching resources, *Keys to Work: A teaching kit for developing the employability skills of CALD learners*, and *Sound English—Reading Resources for pre-literate adults*.

# Editorial

Welcome to the third edition for 2009.

Spring. It's a season for growth, change, new directions, even the odd clean out. These sentiments and themes resonate very powerfully throughout the first two of our feature articles. In, *The Power of 'e': Extending the 'E' in ACE*, Delia Bradshaw asks us to examine the extraordinary transformation that has taken place in our sector in the form of e-learning, while reminding us of the many visionary practitioners who have enabled this evolution to occur. In our second feature, *Groping Towards Our Field*, Rob McCormack offers a provocative assessment of the field and challenges us to examine a host of 'where to from here' questions. While many of the suggestions may be viewed as contentious, the intention centres on creating fresh and rigorous debate.

Our third and fourth feature articles also speak to growth and creative engagement, through learning. Snoeks Desmond provides some powerful insights into the Family Literacy Project based in the rural area of the Southern Drakensber in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, while Margaret Hanrahan in, *Never Too Early*, offers suggestions as to how to assist ESL students on the pathway to their careers.

*Practical Matters* provides an opportunity for teachers to reflect on the *everyday* of their teaching practice. Mary-Ann Tonini, Sue Neale and Diane Walker, all teachers based in regional Victoria, describe their involvement in the ACE Capability Building Project—Community of Practice initiative. They provide some candid accounts of their initial reluctance, describing some of the apprehensions they held of what the process would entail. But they go on to provide very honest admissions about the real benefits they derived from being involved.

*Beside the Whiteboard* also travels beyond Melbourne. We met Amber McLeod, a teacher working at the Education Centre Gippsland. She describes the many people and circumstances that have shaped her work in adult education. In *Technology Matters* we hear from Julia Hanna, an ALBE teacher based at NMIT in Preston. She offers some practical ideas for teaching Information Technology to ALBE students, despite their different levels of computers skills.

In this edition we introduce *From Over the Border*, a version of *Foreign Correspondence*, from a little closer to home. It's designed to shed some light on the experience of teachers from other states, working in our field. In, *The View from the Cottages*, we meet Alex Williams, a literacy teacher working at the Alice Springs Correctional Centre. She describes some of the challenges, frustrations and joys of working within a custodial setting.

Finally, we offer some interesting reviews. Rosie Wickert celebrates, *Reading the Fine Print*, Beverley Campbell's fine book, which documents the history of VALBEC from 1978 to 2008, through the eyes of *Fine Print*. Michael Chalk offers a detailed and insightful look at *Digital Literacies: concepts policies and practices*, edited by Colin Lankshear & Michele Knobel. We also provide some reviews on practical teaching resources, namely *Keys to Work: A teaching kit for developing the employability skills of CALD learners*, and *Sound English—Reading Resources for pre-literate adults*.

The editorial committee offer thanks to all those who have contributed to this edition. We also take this opportunity to wish you a wonderful holiday season and look forward to the ideas we share in 2010.

Tricia Bowen

The Victorian Adult Literacy and Basic Education Council (VALBEC) aims to lead the adult literacy field through identifying issues of importance to practitioners and facilitating positive change. This is achieved through networking, professional support, the sharing of information and the promotion of best practice.

# The Power of 'e': Extending the 'E' in ACE

By Delia Bradshaw

Over the past decade or so, an educational evolution has been redefining our understanding and practices of ACE in profound and comprehensive ways. The name of this transformation is e-learning. As a consequence, e-learning has given us new possibilities of connectedness, community, democracy, global citizenship, lifelong learning, transformational learning, learning to learn, critical literacy and much else. Delia Bradshaw elaborates.

## Introduction

I want to begin by affirming ACE and what it stands for. ACE. Adult. Community. Education. These are the three lighthouse words that guide our lives. Adult. Community. Education. This powerful trio unites all of us in the ACE tribe as we celebrate the contribution of e-learning to the grand tradition of Adult Community Education.

As with all tribes, it's important to celebrate our cultural heritage, to cherish our stories, to admire our grand feats and to sing the praises of our heroes, women and men. Everyone working in ACE has made her or his contribution to our story. Every single ACE story matters.

The gradual development of e-learning in ACE is an unfolding story that has taken place over many years. The collective wisdom of this story is our legacy. In this piece, I provide a few snapshots of this vivacious and audacious story. It is far from the whole story but it is enough to see it is an inspiring story. In telling this story, I hope to do justice to the individual and collective endeavours of those who paved the way for us, to those who, in the process, showed us how to extend the 'E' in ACE.

## Extending the 'E' In ACE

What do I mean by this? Before embarking on the story, I want to draw attention to the title of this piece: *The power of 'e': extending the 'E' in ACE*. As a start, I'd like to muse briefly on the little 'e' before moving on to what extending 'the big E' might mean.

Not everyone is familiar with the term 'e-learning'. If we say the little 'e' is short for 'electronic', and no more, this usually stifles discussion prematurely. In that case, with all the emphasis on the 'electronic' bit, equipment such as computers, digital cameras and, more often these days, mobile phones and mp3 players take prominence as the key factor in e-learning.

It is a rather impoverished view of 'e', don't you think? The 'e' in 'e-learning' means so much more to me. It means emerging, emotional and exhilarating learning, exemplary, essential and effective learning; it means sometimes exotic, regularly exhausting, but always exciting learning. For me, as well, 'e-learning' means everyday and everywhere and everyone learning and, possibly most important of all in ACE, it means egalitarian and ethical learning.



So when I refer to extending the 'E' in ACE, I mean the effect of infusing the little 'e', and all the richness named above, into our ACE ideals and activities. From this point of view, incorporating 'e-learning' is not simply a matter of buying new equipment or adding the odd computer-assisted learning task or attending an obligatory PD session on blended learning. It means giving extra breadth and depth to all aspects of the 'Education' in ACE—in what we do and how we think about it.

Putting it another way, to incorporate 'e-learning' in the ways just named is to automatically extend the 'E' in ACE. A bountiful interpretation and practice of 'e-learning' in ACE results inevitably in extending our educational work; its presence automatically extends the WHY (our purpose), the WHO (our community), the WHEN (the timing), the WHERE (the learning spaces), the WHAT (the scope), the WHAT FOR (the learning achievements) and the HOW (the modes, methods and media). In other words, the power of 'e' as a multidimensional force in 'e-learning', and the way it extends meanings, values, ideals, purposes, practices and participants in ACE, means it redefines our understanding of Education itself.

That is the gift of 'e-learning' to ACE. When recognising its power to make education richer in SO MANY ways, it is clear that this small 'e' is not so small at all.

## Key Milestones

To put our current situation in context, it is time for a little history. To do this, I have chosen to highlight some key moments or milestones, ones that have brought us in Victoria to where we are today. In preparation for today, I asked a number of our e-learning pioneers and innovators to complete this sentence, *A memorable moment OR milestone in e-learning for me has been....* Commemorating these moments means

revisiting those who have travelled this path before us, role models who know, and knew, the breadth and depth and significance of their explorations into e-learning.

Here are the responses I received.

**Michael Gwyther said:**

Well, Delia, seeing the link between the emerging web and possibilities for learner publication in ALBE and ESL classes. I was very much inspired by the work of Dale Pobega at Duke Street Neighbourhood House which inspired a few of us at Ballarat East Neighbourhood House to learn html for the sole purpose of uploading our student writing to the web! I have been involved in a few projects since then but none were as exciting and "Frontierlandish" as those few weeks in '96 when we taught ourselves those skills and published our work together.

**Clint Smith said:**

I'd name the two 1996 documents, 'Convergent Technologies in Adult and Community Education,' both the Report and the Kit, that we did for ACFE.

**Josie Rose said:**

For me a key experience was management of my first LearnScope project in 1999. It set all who participated at Narre Community Learning Centre on a technology path that they still follow to this day. As well, it catapulted me into a very different, more national sphere. I was working as an ESL teacher at Narre at the time. We were invited to present at the 'Spotlight on the Provider' conference in Sydney that year. We were so nervous, but I remember standing in our presentation room at the conference centre in Darling Harbour thinking, I think we have arrived.

**Gillian Ryan said:**

Using common and popular forms of online communication, for example:

- using 'My Connected Community' with adult literacy students
- my first time using Elluminate
- using the internet to engage reluctant learners in learning
- my first online meeting using Skype.

**Michael Chalk said:**

When Libby Barker decided in 2001 that PRACE needed a flexible learning co-ordinator and encouraged the strengths of a sessional adult literacy teacher by appointing me to the role.

**Glenda McPherson said:**

Josie as a Flexible Learning Leader in 2000 and Michael Chalk in 2004 were significant in terms of lifting the e-learning profile within, but more importantly, outside

the ACFE sector in Victoria and nationally. As well, the TAFE Frontiers initial Flexible ACE research and report in 2004 and the opportunity to revisit it with the AccessACE research in 2007 and report in 2008 was a rare opportunity for follow up research!

**Mary Schooneveldt said:**

Personally it was the ACMI 2004 digital storytelling course and then the process of creating an ACE friendly (free!) way of introducing the concept to people in the region.

It is important to put these memorable moments in a wider historical perspective. One result of my research into the evolution of e-learning in ACE in Victoria is a timeline of key initiatives, projects, publications and funding sources that can be found on the conference wiki at <http://eshowcase.acfe.vic.edu.au/Bradshaw>. The scope of research and experimentation over nearly twenty years is truly remarkable. As well, a slideshow on Flickr at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/biddyb/sets/72157612809077443/> displays some of the texts that mark key milestones along the way. Some might call them foundation texts.

**Pioneers and Visionaries**

Another outcome of my research is a collection of *Fine Print* journal excerpts spanning the years 1996 to 2001; the Victorian Adult Literacy and Basic Education Council (VALBEC) journal has long documented and promoted e-learning in ACE. The voices of our pioneers and visionaries that we hear in these excerpts allow us to follow in the footsteps of our hardy ACE explorers. Their words evoke so powerfully the new educational horizons they glimpsed, a vision of e-learning that they recognised would refresh ways of conceptualising and enacting adult education. Their words are as fresh today as when first uttered quite some years ago. I have organised their contributions chronologically.

**In 1996 Alan Wayman, ALBE co-ordinator at Yarraville Community Centre, wrote:**

With a little skill and a lot of patience, you can retrieve information, images, programs and sounds. Make friends, get ripped off, become involved in political activities, study at a college on the other side of the world, find work, play games, listen to poets, watch the weather change in Hawaii. It's endless, and the possibilities are increasing by the minute

('From out-of-date to 'classic': making use of older technology', pp. 24/5, *Fine Print*, June 1996, Vol 18, No 2).

Here Alan points to the magnitude or multiplicity of educational purposes.

**In 1997 Mexie Butler, Multimedia Project Officer at Flemington Reading and Writing Program, wrote:**

One day when I was browsing on the web, I found this

thing called 'chat'. It meant that I could talk to people anywhere in the world in real time... Amazing, to think that somewhere on the other side of the world there was someone sitting in front of their computer, doing the same as I was doing  
('Look @ this!', p. 20, Fine Print, Spring 1997, Vol 20, No 3).

Here Mexie points to the ease and excitement of global reach.

**In 1998, Dale Pobega, language teacher and Online Literacies Worker at Duke Street Community House, Sunshine, wrote:**

The 1998 Central Western Metropolitan ACFE student conference is currently being organised by three groups of adult learners as part of their CGEA. The students are increasing general knowledge while improving their screen literacy skills, establishing friendships through Moo and e-mail, and feeling part of a community of learners on the Net without losing their 'real life' sense of connectedness as they work on the student conference project with its practical orientation  
('Language knowledge and e-literacies for ALBE', pp. 12/3, Fine Print, Winter 1998, Vol 21, No 2).

Here, Dale points to the community development potential of participating in online communities.

**In 1999, Josie Rose, educational technology manager at Narre Community Learning Centre and New Learning Technologies project worker for Southern WesternPort ACFE, wrote:**

There are two crucial factors to the success of a New Learning Technology in the language and literacy classroom—teacher confidence and a sense of enjoyment and fun  
('Hard fun: using computer in the language classroom', p. 15, Fine Print, Autumn 1999, Vol 22, No 1).

Here, Josie points to the role of 'serious' play in professional development.

**In 2001, Michael Chalk, project officer at PRACE, wrote:**

Term one, Y2K, and PRACE is entering the trial stage of an exciting ACFE project to examine NLT in ESL provision. Other providers on the project are Olympic, Meadow Heights and Lalor Living and Learning. On day one of the inter-class communication trial, the learners at Olympic are writing their first introductory letters to the learners at Preston... 'I'm finding this very demoralizing', said student M, genuinely frustrated, as she wrestled with the e-mail sign-up procedure. I sat with her knowing how important it was to find some success

at that point... When she finally got herself an e-mail account, the letter M sent her partner in the other group was very inspiring, urging the other woman to believe in herself and not give up.

('Open Forum: Email as a Second Language', p.30, Fine Print, Autumn 2000, Vol 23, No 1).

Here, Michael points to a new and vital version of learner empowerment for lifelong learning.

**In 2001, Dale Pobega, manager of ACEWEB, wrote:**

Twenty-seven online workshops were held across the four days of the e-conference with morning, afternoon and evening sessions attended by 300 conference participants and presenters logged in from Israel, the USA and Thailand. Transcripts of all e-conference sessions can be found online

('Community and Connectedness: a review of the inaugural ACEWEB e-conference, 2001', p. 19, Fine Print, Summer 2001, Vol 24, No 4).

Here, Dale points to the wonder of transcending the boundaries and limitations imposed by time, space and distance.

What comes through these words so strongly are the very same features of e-learning in ACE that we cherish so much today—the diversity of educational purposes, access in all its forms, capacity for lifelong learning, personal and community development, democratic participation both locally and globally, the role of play in professional development, freedom from the limitations of time and distance. And these educational virtues were first sighted and trialled by our ACE explorers as early as a decade ago.

**The Time it Takes**

But, as we all know, significant and sustainable change does not happen in an instant. As Glenda indicated in her response to me:

E-learning does not happen overnight. It is a slow process before it can be embedded. TAFE Frontiers research showed how long and hard it was for TAFEs—it is much longer and harder for ACFE ... Infrastructure—hardware, software, professional development and personnel—is very sparse...and that means...it is much more down to individuals within providers.

Two timeline documents, put together by Mary Schooneveldt, trace highlights of the e-learning story of Southern Western Port Learning Communities in the Southern Western Port ACFE region from 1998 to 2007 (Schooneveldt, 2003–7). See figures 1 & 2.

Taken together and studied closely, they portray succinctly the time it takes for change to happen and endure. Other

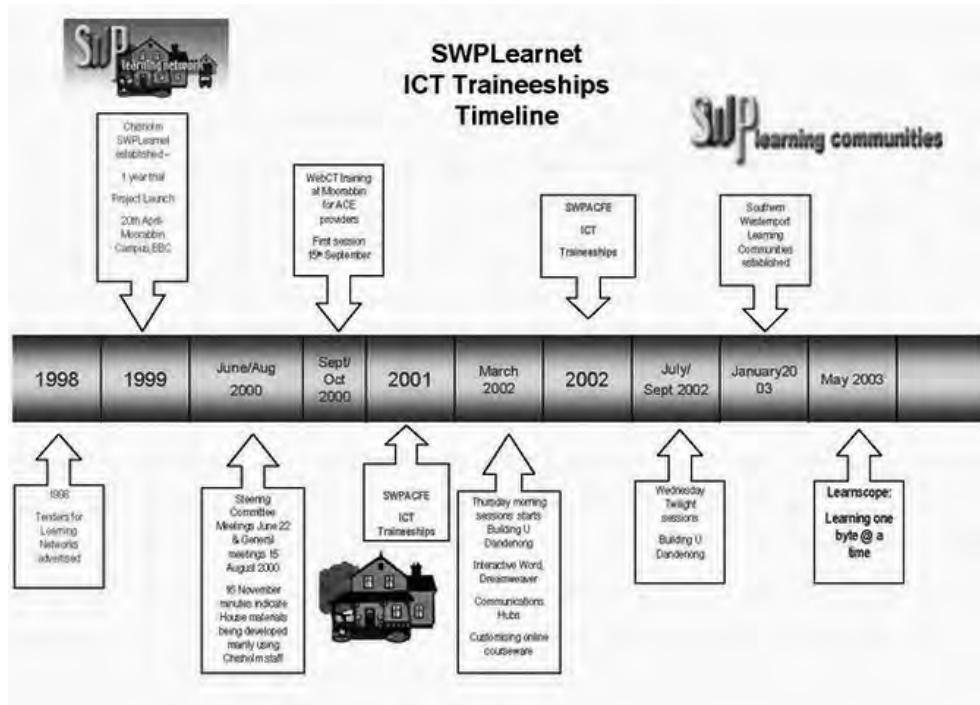


Figure 1: Timeline document 1

ACFE regions now also boast a similar track record in e-learning, displaying maturity in both breadth and depth. Now, over ten years on, what are the ‘lessons learnt’ from all this commitment and activity?

## Key Themes

Three themes recur when listening to those have been involved in extending e-learning in ACE. The three themes are:

- Leadership
- Action Research Projects and
- Professional Development in all its forms

## Leadership

When they take a leading role, government agencies make a huge difference. Consider the vast amount of good generated by the array of projects and activities funded and fostered by the Australian Flexible Learning Framework over many years.

Many ACE managers and teachers have also commented on the key role, before being disbanded, played by *TAFE Frontiers*—citing it as a powerful source of knowledge, support, professional development and networking that was particularly supportive of ACE.

A number of ACFE regional councils have long affirmed e-learning initiatives and, more recently, the ACFE Board has consolidated past successes by supporting the 2007 *AccessACE* and 2008 *E-Mentor* projects.

Individual leaders are also very influential. Mary Schoon-eveldt remarked in her response to me:

A key moment is a very recent one: the realization that we now have tech savvy managers and teachers in ACE willing to enthusiastically travel down the e-learning path.

Perhaps the most effective local leadership comes from the combination of organisational commitment AND willing, dedicated individuals. In other words, individual passion plus organisational backing are an irresistible, dynamic duo.

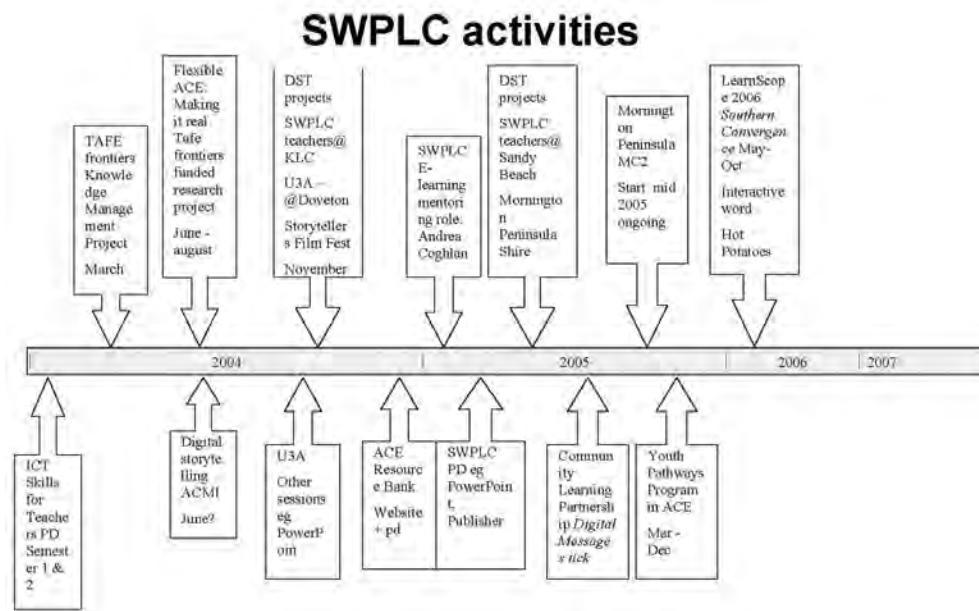
In her contribution to the *AccessACE* wiki in the section called ‘E-learning around the regions’, Lynne Gibb, e-learning mentor at Coonara Community House in Upper Ferntree Gully reinforces this idea:

Despite quite a deal of interest in the use of technologies in adult learning within the Eastern Metro Region the uptake was slow until the recent emergence of organisations and individuals keen to take a leadership role.

The partnering between Morrison House and Coonara Community House in 2005 for a New Practices Project explored the use of podcasting... This project lead to the identification of a couple of key individuals within the local ACE sector who had the necessary passion and drive to set new learning technologies firmly on the agenda.

## Action Research Projects

Never underestimate the power of community-based action research.



**Figure 2: Timeline document 2**

Michael Chalk singles out the following e-learning examples for particular mention:

- Australian Flexible Learning Framework projects and resources with their strengthening of networks of people and communities.
- The national Community Engagement projects' vital role for gaining a national perspective.
- The Victorian ACFE board's full support for the 2007 Access ACE research and built on with the 2008 regional e-mentor project.

Also, let's not forget the marvellous and popular educational e-resources that have emerged from community-based action research projects. The following examples spring to mind: *World Wide Water*, *Online Banking*, *Snakes Alive!* and *English at the Beach*, (produced by NMRACFE Online Resources, a consortium consisting of TAFE Frontiers, the ANTA Adult Literacy National Project and LearnLinks, an RMIT/NMRACFE partnership), *The Learning House* (produced by SMRACFE) and *Dream Holiday* (produced by the ACENet Learning Network and Flemington Reading and Writing Program).

### Professional Development

The third theme, Professional Development is the one, time and time again, named as number one priority in 'lessons learnt'. This theme includes networks and mentoring.

Two recent ACFE-funded reports—the 2007 *AccessACE: clever uses of ICT in ACE*, subtitled 'Lessons learnt in blended learning—a guide for managing and teaching' and the 2008 *E-mentor final report*—illustrate this well.

In the latter of these two reports, Josie Rose, the author of both, sums up the present situation this way:

It often takes a three year period to make deep and broad change. The regions were asked to provide feedback on what the next step should be.

Three recommended next steps, all to do with professional development, are:

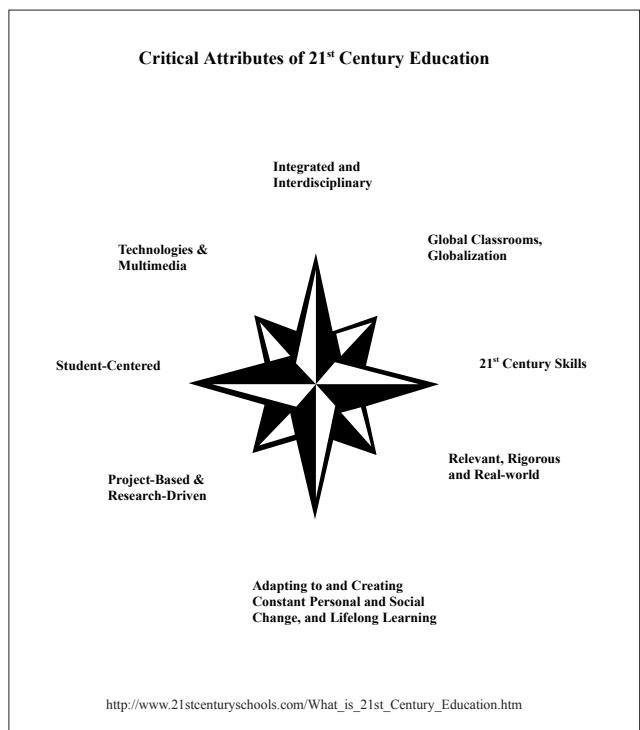
1. Providing professional development opportunities for organisations to 'try out' different technologies in non-threatening settings.
2. Extending the e-mentor project to assist providers with the implementation of identified projects.
3. Developing a community of practice in the region ... to broaden and deepen their skills and knowledge.

Year after year, the evidence is the same. A judicious combination of Leadership, Action Research and Professional Development makes a world of difference, no matter what the size or stage of the organisation. ACE has never been in a better position to say 'Yes, e-learning is for everyone'.

### Conclusion

I began with ACE and I want to end with ACE. Above all, I want to return to that all-important big 'E' in ACE. How has the arrival of e-learning extended our understanding of 'Education' in Adult Community Education? What difference has it made to our ACE policies and practices?

Over the years we have seen 'e' moving from the exceptional and exotic to the everywhere and everyday and everybody,



**Figure 1: 21st century attributes**

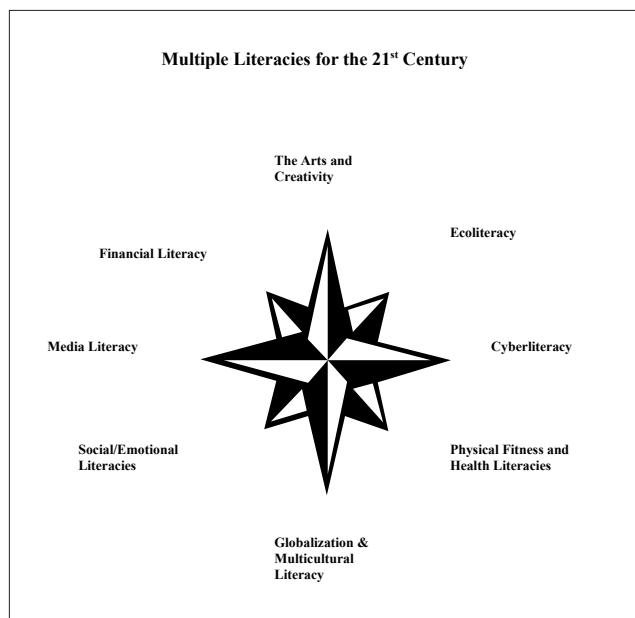
from being a novelty to being intrinsic, from ‘acting locally and thinking globally’ to ‘thinking locally and acting globally’.

In the process, this educational evolution has been redefining our understanding and practices of ACE in profound and comprehensive ways. E-learning has given us new possibilities of connectedness, community, democracy, global citizenship, lifelong learning, transformational learning, learning to learn, critical literacy and much else.

Putting it another way, incorporating the little ‘e’ in ‘e-learning’ into ACE means extending the big ‘E’ in far-reaching and significant ways. Consider, for example, as we have heard in today’s stories, how it changes:

IDEAS and  
IDEALS  
MEANINGS and  
MEANS  
PRINCIPLES,  
PURPOSES,  
PRACTICES and  
PARTICIPATION.

This deepening, broadening and enriching of Education is not another ‘thing to do’; it’s an automatic bonus when ‘e’ is there. And this will continue to happen wherever and whenever ‘e-learning in ACE’ is alive and well, as it is today.



**Figure 2: 21st century literacies**

As I draw to a close, I have two final questions:

- What potential ‘goods’ beckons us in ACE?
- What work—both thinking work and educational work related to ‘e-learning in ACE’—is still to be done?

My response to these two questions is determined by reflecting on what constitutes critical attributes and multiple literacies for 21<sup>st</sup> century education. This reflection prompts us to name ACE purposes and priorities precisely and proudly.

To the 21<sup>st</sup> century attributes first. See figure 1.

‘E-learning’ is not simply about ‘Technologies and Media’. It is about all the attributes featured on the *Possibilities for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Education* website, that is, ‘e-learning is about Lifelong Learning, Global Classrooms and Globalisation, Adapting to and Creating Constant Personal and Social Change

And the 21<sup>st</sup> century literacies. See figure 2.

E-learning cannot be reduced to ‘Cyberliteracy’, important as that is. It is also Ecoliteracy and Multicultural Literacy and Creativity and all the other literacies foregrounded on the same site.

So, for me, ‘e-learning in ACE’ is about aiming for and achieving these attributes and literacies, ones that are necessities and not luxuries in our 21<sup>st</sup> century world. Our ACE history tells us ‘Yes, We Can’. Our vocation as 21<sup>st</sup> century adult community e-educators declares we must, and will, continue to explore the power of ‘e’. In this way, we will continue the long and proud tradition of extending the ‘E’ in ACE.

**Continued on page 18 ...**

# Groping towards our Field

By Rob McCormack

Is it time to face some challenging questions about the very nature of our field? Is it important to examine our identity and our practices? What is it that we value? Rob McCormack opens the debate.

This article was supposed to be a report on my Keynote speech at the Australian Council of Adult Literacy (ACAL) Conference 2009. However in a speech, especially a Keynote, you need to be good and uplifting. In writing, though, you can be bad. In fact why write if not to provoke. So this piece is assertively aphoristic and will hopefully offend everyone at some point or other, but hopefully not everyone all the time.

## Our field is badly named

LLN—a shameless device for forcing ESL and ALBE into a single object of governance.

Adult Literacy—no adult or youth with any dignity or self-respect would want to attend a class with literacy in the title. Oh! The shame of it!

ABE—this was a failed attempt, by myself and others, to connect the field to a larger, more mainstream narrative.

Second Chance Education—I still use this term to characterise my own deepest motives and values as an educator, but I don't think anyone has suggested it as a name for the field. Actually, thinking about it now, why not? I'm sure it would make sense to both students and to the general public. It would also sidestep the debilitating focus on 'literacy' as the goal or object defining our field.

## We have no classic texts or founding cultural hero(ine)s

Yes, a few of us oldies might still dip into Freire now & then. But who else is there? James Gee gets mentioned, but how many have read his more recent work on games culture. I still dip into Halliday, and presumably the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) trained do also. But he's not really 'one of us'; we appropriated him. Who else?

## We have no widely shared autochthonic (indigenous) practices or pedagogies

Almost none of us are 'LLN natives'; we are all 'LLN immigrants'. We learnt our understandings and pedagogies of and around language somewhere else—in primary teaching, secondary teaching, humanities, literary studies, cultural studies, applied linguistics, ESL, EFL, or maths and science education. Most of us slipped into the field sideways from some other more mainstream, more defined educational field. No one has learnt their trade as a

pedagogue entirely within our field—or if they have, you could only feel for them.

## We have no internal standards

MacIntyre (1985) distinguished between 'internal goods' and 'external goods', and argued that genuine practices possess their own internal goods that can be assessed only by judgment, that has been honed practically and reflectively within the practice itself. Criteria for judging internal goods are invisible to outsiders, who only see the external goods. Thus, chess masters can judge chess moves, master chefs guide cooking by novices, ballet instructors assess those learning ballet, historians weigh the work of their peers and students and so on. But do Master LNN teachers also have these powers of judgment for assessing quality. Are there any criteria we share or learnt from participating in the field? Or are the standards of the field totally submissive to the external criteria embodied in the NRS and its successor? Notice that by definition the judgments of experts are intuitive tacit judgments of taste that cannot be easily captured in words. Forcing a field to voice its judgments in the simplistic terms of a NRS is a very effective way to undermine the integrity of that field, and to ensure that it has no genuine 'internal goods' around which to form a community of judgment for passing practices and their evaluating criteria on to the next generation.

## We are totally submissive to (because dependent on) governmental directives

Without a community of practice and occasions for testing, sharing and reflecting on how highly skilled practitioners respond to 'what is in front of them' (as Robbie Deans insists the Wallabies must do) rather than enacting preplanned or rehearsed moves, we do not have a genuine Practice. We do not have anything to pass on to the next generation. No wonder the field is unable to generate any interest or engagement from younger generations. We baby boomers may live off a fading 70's habitus, derived from the radical days of social justice but we are now moving out of the field.

## We have no defining practices of which to be proud

I can't think of a single pedagogic practice that is distinctive to NLL/AL/ABE. Can you? To my knowledge, no one uses Freire's 'generative words' or even an adaptation of it. I suspect that all our educational practices are derivative.

## We have nothing distinctive or special about language to offer students

Our field knows nothing much about language theoretically, even though we had the gift of living on the same continent as MAK Halliday. (By the way, you can now throw away all those musty photocopies and buy the ten volume *Collected Works of Halliday*)

It has not developed a practical knowledge of language and pedagogy that could be used for developing or enhancing the human being and lifeworlds of our students through practical pedagogic exercises of engagement and reflection on and around language

## In truth, the Field, whatever its name, has not yet come into existence

I wouldn't mind if this meant that it shared Derrida's sense of a utopian future to which we were trying to be faithful in judging the present. But it seems that the present is all we have. We have no past, no future. We are simply part of an infernal bureaucratic machine.

I have always had the sense that the field we are in has yet to be born. Which is why it amazed me when many leading practitioners seemed so keen to engage with policy makers in the mid 90's. It implied they experienced our field as already possessing a strong, distinct and well-defined identity, together with a secure grasp of its internal goods.

So different from what I felt. I approached the dialogue with dread, which is why I wrote *Framing the Field* (1991). To pretend that we could have developed a set of defined pedagogic practices—if given time, or at least some that we could argue about. The problem was that these were no different to the pedagogic practices of many other fields. No better, no worse. The same. And so, not grounds for claiming a special specificity, particularity or uniqueness for our field.

## "This is so depressing! Don't you have anything uplifting to say?"

No, not really! I can't really see much hope in the short term. The rationalist market-based micro-managing of Left wing governments has landed us with the worst of both worlds. A know-all bureaucracy. And a market structure that undermines collaboration and the formation of shared communities of enquiry, reflection or practice among practitioners. Which undermines all sense of community, full stop. Even strong professions such as mainstream teachers or medical professions are finding it hard to resist the strong colonisation of their fields by the 'external' auditing regimes of governmental bureaucracies.

OK Some positive suggestions:

## What is the internal good of our field?

Here is how I tried to answer this question in 2004:

Adult literacy is a second chance education, which through performative and interpretative engagement with the canonical texts and textual performances of cultures and communities aims to cultivate phronesis for responsible adulthood. (McCormack 2004)

To make much sense of it you would need to (re)read the original in Fine Print. To have another crack at what I was trying to say then:

Although governments may believe they can (or should pretend to) run the world and people's lives on evidence-based sociological/psychological/economic knowledge, in fact we are all dependent on practical ethical judgements as the basis for forming understanding, common ground, trust and shared experience. And this experience lies deeper than any institutions of governmentality or economics. For 2000 years a primary purpose of education has been to inculcate these values into future generations. How? By bringing students into deep discursive engagement with the texts carrying, enacting and reflecting on these values.

Even quicker: Second chance education = liberal arts for those who, for whatever reason, did not engage with the cultural sources of who they are and of the communities they belong to. Why liberal arts? Because liberal arts teaches you to have a mind of your own, how to express it, and how to acknowledge, engage with, and learn with and from others who also have minds of their own.

Final aphorism: The goal of learning is to be a learner, not a knower. Openness not knowledge. To be someone open to learning, open to the new, to the strange, to the unfamiliar. And who can discover the strangeness and unfamiliarity of their own lives and realities.

Final final aphorism: In an interview marking his 102nd birthday, Gadamer (my cultural hero) remarked: "Man cannot live without hope; that is the only proposition which I would gladly continue to defend without qualification."

I take this to mean that we must continue to judge ourselves, and the present by cultivating and exercising values that transcend who we are and what governments want of us. And if keeping alive these values is what we are charged with, then it is no wonder we are not a normal healthy field. Our field is inherently subversive: its concern is with the excluded and marginalised; its concern is to enable them to find a self, a mind, a voice, a language, a community, a life and keep their culture alive; and all of this can only be even envisioned by invoking a reality beyond the boundaries of

current reality. To move beyond a resigned embrace of social fate, requires a rich engagement with cultural meanings, performances and discourses—as a ground and source shaping the sensibility and practical wisdom we need to ‘keep hope alive’.

Surely it is only to be expected that as a field dedicated to the marginalised we should also be marginalised. Why would the powerful support those supporting the powerless?

Apart from this ethical side, what other ‘internal goods’ could or should we have?

I believe we need a trained ear for language, backed by a rich metalanguage. In modern times, Halliday’s systemic functional linguistics provides us with this. However, I still believe that it was during the 2000 year long history of ancient rhetoric that highest levels of attentiveness and attunement to language and its workings were attained. But how, as a field, we could retrieve or renew this intimacy with language and its powers of meaning making, I just don’t know. If it is any comfort, we are not alone; university arts faculties and the humanities are in the same boat.

One trend that is hopeful is the shift from a spectator-ish scholarly humanities towards a performance oriented creative arts model in which students themselves produce and publish for real audiences in real contexts, rather than write scholarly commentaries or interpretative responses to the work of others. And of course Web 2.0 also points in this direction. In fact I think we are probably moving into another rhetorical renaissance, after a few centuries dominated by ‘the book’. This larger social trend in dominant forms of communication cheers me up no end.

Finally, I should say that the continued existence and health of *Fine Print* itself is a wonderful thing. Despite the weaknesses of the field I have been highlighting, *Fine Print* has managed to keep on keeping on. It provides a forum around which discussion, debate and conversation can circulate

**As a second chance educator, Rob McCormack has worked across a range of systems and settings including the old Technical Schools, TAFE and Higher Education. Most of his professional life has been in the western suburbs of Melbourne with a stint away in the Northern Territory working at Batchelor Institute. He has an abiding interest in the role of language and literacy as a medium for educational progression. More recently he has developed a strong interest in ancient rhetoric as serving a similar function to second chance education.**

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(Note: I am aware that many of these sentences may be read as ungrammatical or wrongly punctuated. But I enjoyed doing it and thought: why not! Why should so-called rules of grammar govern our prose? They don’t rule novelists or poets. Let’s move back to a more rhetorical, more performative, more active, even quirky mode of grammaring and punctuating.)

# **Strengthening Family Literacy Practices: Experiences of the Family Literacy Project, KwaZulu Natal, South Africa**

*By Snoeks Desmond*

Snoeks Desmond shares the story of the South African-based Family Literacy Project highlighting the challenges and successes of supporting adults to develop their own literacy skills and to be role models for their young children.

**A**n approach to family literacy was piloted in South Africa in March 2000. This pilot project continues today, a fully fledged, registered not-for-profit organisation: the Family Literacy Project (FLP). The project is based in deeply rural areas of the Southern Drakensberg in KwaZulu-Natal. This is a spectacularly beautiful world heritage site but for many local people life there is hard with little electricity, poor roads and often no piped water. Paid employment opportunities are few and many adults, mainly the men, live and work in cities several hours drive away from their homes. The HIV/AIDS pandemic has claimed many lives and 30% of the population in this area are thought to be HIV positive. This pandemic has had an effect on family structure, and many children live with grandparents or members of the extended family. In this article, the term 'parent' will include whoever takes on the responsibility of parenting.

## **Establishing the Family Literacy Project (FLP)**

The FLP was not established as a response to an articulated community need. The formation of the project was prompted by findings of a research study, conducted over three years from 1997 to 2000, into the effectiveness of pre-school interventions funded through the national Department of Education ECD Pilot Project (Khulisa Management Services 2000). One of the findings was that, despite training of community-based pre-school teachers, there was little or no improvement in the literacy scores of the young children in their care. It seemed that an approach focused on strengthening parental skills might be more effective in ensuring that young children had a good start to their literacy development. Well-established projects in the United States of America and the United Kingdom provided ideas that were adapted to suit the South African situation.

The main aim of the FLP, which brings together adult literacy, early literacy, and health through participatory tools, is to encourage young children and their parents to see reading as a shared pleasure and a valuable skill. The emphasis is on the enjoyable aspects of reading and writing. Underpinning this is the belief that it is easier to learn



something when you are actively involved and having fun. This does not mean that learning will not require some effort, but that it is not seen as a chore.

In the FLP groups, adults come together to improve their own literacy skills, but integrated into each unit of six to seven sessions are supplementary materials, discussion and activities that link what the parent is learning to the way she interacts with her own children at home.

It took some time to develop a way of working that appeared to suit the women who came to those first sessions run in 2000. Those early sessions included discussions by the adults on the ways they could support the development of early literacy skills in their children and every session included a chance to try out a play activity. Although the adults were not asked about their own levels of literacy, it was clear that many were struggling with reading and writing. With this in mind, activities were designed to help adults as well as children develop skills such as matching, letter recognition, sequencing and interpreting pictures.

Adults made books, cutting out pictures from magazines. Working in pairs, they practised how best to use these with their children, asking questions and modelling how to handle the book.

After six months, the FLP raised the funds to engage a consultant to conduct a participatory rural appraisal. The findings showed that, in addition to learning about early



childhood issues, the adults wanted to improve their own levels of literacy. So, each of the groups was asked to select a local woman who could be trained as a family literacy facilitator. These women are the backbone of the FLP and have attended a range of courses to improve their skills, with one of them currently studying for her Bachelor Education Honours degree.

Since 2001, the groups have met twice a week during school terms. They follow a cycle of six to eight sessions with a particular issue as a focus. During each unit, the group decides what action to take that will make use of any new information they have gathered during the sessions. For example, they have decided: to ask their husbands/partners to use a condom (HIV/Aids unit); to walk their child to crèche (child protection unit); to start an income generation project (crime and poverty unit).

The FLP has introduced a number of post-literacy activities, believing that you “use it or lose it” where literacy is concerned. These include:

- *Pen friends*: Women in one group are encouraged to write to women from a neighbouring group.
- *Notice boards*: Community notice boards are maintained by each group to be read by the wider community. Information on these is taken from the most recent unit covered by the group. For example, group members draw, or write about, child protection or HIV/Aids.
- *Parents and children*: Known as *Umzali Nengane*, (this means parent and child), are journals kept by the women to record interactions with their children. They paste pictures in the books and talk to their children about the pictures. Sometimes they record trips to town, or write down a child’s comments on a book they have read together. This has been particularly important in modelling use of literacy and shared enjoyment in talking and reading together.
- *Newsletter*: The project has a regular newsletter edited by one of the facilitators. Articles cover project news, and information, and group members write in to the editor.

- *Libraries*: The FLP has established three community libraries for everyone in the neighbourhood. The other groups have a box of books for their members. This, in areas where there were few books and the nearest libraries in small villages far from these rural homesteads.

The Family Literacy Project has definitely started a culture of reading amongst the participants. Most of the participants read on a regular basis (up to 3 times a week or more), sometimes in the evenings or late afternoon, but mostly over the weekends when they have a bit more time available to themselves. Individual reading includes library books, newsletters and magazines. (Labuschagne: 2002)

### Tools Used in the FLP

From the earliest days, the FLP has used participatory tools to encourage discussion in the groups. These have been adapted and refined from the Reflect approach to literacy and development. (Archer and Cottingham 1996)

The description of some of the tools used in the FLP has been taken from an unpublished study. (Desmond)

#### Community map

The FLP group is asked to draw a map of their community. This is usually done on the floor on large sheets of paper, though some FLP groups have tried to do this outside, using branches, stones and leaves to indicate different features. Once the map is complete, and this can take a long time as there is always debate over the number of houses, the course of the river, or the exact site of a school, the FLP facilitator will lead a discussion on different aspects. She may ask about the use of common ground or about what happens at the river or in the forest. In this way, a full picture is built up not only of physical layout but also of different activities in the community and the knowledge and values underpinning the maintenance of community life.

Once the map has been drawn, the group then works on formulating problems. This must start with a statement about the real problem, for example rather than saying “there is no clinic” the problem should be phrased as “people have to travel long distances to get allopathic health care”. The group can then look for creative solutions to the problem rather than focusing only on the lack of a facility.

#### Mobility Map

To explain the tool known as the Mobility Map, I will describe how it can be used to actively explore the use of literacy skills. The FLP group is asked to draw or write down in what places they need to use literacy and numeracy skills. They use one piece of card for each place that they identify. Once mobility maps have been completed by each group



member, the group can discard the duplicates and make one large mobility map for the whole group.

The FLP facilitator will then ask questions of clarification to establish exactly why literacy skills are necessary at these places. An example would be the clinic where people say they need to read signs, times, posters, leaflets, appointment times, and medicine dosage. They also need to know the days of the week and times when the clinic is open and for what purpose—for example, children, adults, elderly, or pregnant women. So within one site, literacy and numeracy skills are needed to find out a number of different things.

When this tool was used in one of the groups, women said that they could ask others for this information but they really wanted to be able to find things out for themselves. A lot of the discussion around literacy skills centred on the way women felt inferior and lacking in self-confidence when faced with a situation where they needed to ask for help. They also felt that they might be being cheated, on taxi trips or in shops, for example.

### Venn Diagram

Leading on from the Mobility Map that can be used to explore literacy skills, is the Venn Diagram where each woman will draw a circle in the centre of the page to indicate herself. She then writes down, or draws on pieces of card, which literacy and numeracy skills she has and which she wants to develop. Close to the circle indicating herself, she places the cards with the skills she wants to develop first; those that are not so important to her are placed further away. Alternatively, she can be asked to place cards close to her that show what she can already do, and those she needs help with, further away.

### The Tree

This is a very popular tool that has been used often in the FLP to explore many different topics such as budgets, early childhood development, or water-borne diseases. A large tree shape is drawn on a piece of paper and the leaves made from pieces of paper, each bearing an effect or result. The

group writes, or draws, roots that describe the cause or input in the particular topic under discussion.

### Evaluations

There has been an external evaluation of the FLP each year since 2001. These evaluations have been participatory and a range of methods have been used. The evaluation in 2006 was particularly interesting. This was an adaptation of Photo Voice (Wang 2005) and took place over seven months. The first step was to give the FLP facilitators lessons on how to use the cameras. Before taking a photograph, they had to ask themselves how it would show that people were beginning to read and that they were enjoying that. The photographs were displayed at a team meeting and then at each of the sites. FLP group members were encouraged to talk about the photographs and choose the ones they thought best reflected reading. This approach to evaluation promoted a sense of ownership of the monitoring and evaluation process and everyone felt part of what was going on.

The FLP facilitators enjoyed taking the photographs and one of them used her photographs to stimulate discussion in her FLP group. The FLP group members became very involved in this evaluation, looking at all the photographs and commenting on them. These comments were recorded and included in the final evaluation report. (Frow 2006) This evaluation provided a glimpse into the homes of the FLP members, showing relaxed, informal moments of how people were engaging with books and reading.

### Conclusion

The FLP approach to family literacy was developed over several years and a real attempt has been made to respect and acknowledge what FLP group members already know and can do, adding new information to this through discussion and materials developed for the project. The hope continues to be that children, and their parents, will see reading as a pleasure and will be able to use their literacy skills to improve their lives.

Snoeks Desmond has worked in the field of early childhood education and development in her home country of South Africa and in England. From 2000—2007 she worked as the founding director of the Family Literacy Project and is now a consultant specialising in materials development.

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*Continued on page 25 ...*

# Never too early: Assisting ESL students on the pathway to their careers

By Margaret Hanrahan

ESL teachers are in an ideal position to encourage their students to think about, research and plan for their future careers. Margaret Hanrahan explains.

Finding satisfactory employment is one of the major challenges for new arrivals. Even those with excellent English and a good education and training rarely hit the ground running. Some migrants have training that does not easily equate to what is required in Australia. Others, even those who are well educated with job experience, may take the opportunity to re-think their career goals or aim for a career that was not open to them in their own country. Whatever their situation, the ESL student needs assistance to move smoothly along the pathway to their career. It is their teachers who are best positioned to assist.

I have had many career preparation roles in recent years at RMIT, working with ESL students, who ranged from new arrivals to long-term residents. I have worked as a pathways adviser and as an ESL teacher in a dual certificate course, which included work experience. All this has helped me reach the conclusion, that ESL teachers are often the workers best positioned to assist students along their career pathway.

When I first started working as an ESL teacher over a decade ago, I rarely thought about my low level students' future careers, thinking that they needed to improve their English first. Certainly this was what the students believed. Many, not only the new arrivals, were also pre-occupied with current concerns such as housing or finances. There was no energy left to think about future careers. Besides, we had all heard the horror stories of students who wasted time by failing in courses, because of their poor English and had to return to our classes before trying again. I am ashamed to say that I even discouraged some students from going to TAFE after Certificate III in ESL, whom I now think should have gone.

Now I think that it is never too early to start getting ESL students to think about, research and plan for their future careers. The reasons for my change of opinion: there have been some external changes and I have found out about others pathways that may have always been there. Many students can start by doing a dual certificate course, where they study ESL as well as a VET course, after Certificate II. Others, even if they want a professional career, may

choose to do a TAFE course first even though their English is barely sufficient to cope.

## Assisting Students with Career Choices

When I started my three day a week job there were already other RMIT staff members who were assisting students to find out about careers. The RMIT Careers unit has many staff members who could assist ESL students. ESL students have been to their workshops on volunteering and VTAC, and even ones run specifically for our students. These workshops could only be attended by our higher level students and even then, many had to be well prepared in class to be able to understand what was being said. Our students could visit the career unit for individual consultations but our students rarely sought them out. The idea of it was alien and even the process of having to make an appointment was often unfortunately too daunting. It was really only open to confident students who had a good understanding of career preparation facilities.

Many students did gain much assistance from their classroom teachers. At one of our campuses, where only Certificate III and IV were taught, teachers at the initial interview/assessment quickly discussed career plans and issues with potential students both to assess where English classes fitted into their plans, but also to get them to start thinking of their exit plans. These teachers had mid-semester interviews where career pathway plans were discussed. Many teachers were able to weave work on career issues and writing applications into their curriculum. They often also spent extra time outside class assisting students who had specific requests. Certainly by the end of each semester the teacher would have discussed career plans along with immediate post course plans. These teachers also organized about 3–5 past students to talk about their individual pathways and plans. These worked very well. This gave the students hope that they could make it. It also surprised them that these students, who were coping in mainstream courses, did not have perfect English. This gave the current students optimism about their future studies and that possibly they could start earlier than they thought. It also showed a variety of actual pathways to different careers. To try and have the students relate to all

our current students we endeavoured to have speakers who came from a range of countries.

At the other campus most teachers did not see career planning as part of their role as an ESL teacher and certainly it was not required in their curriculum. They did little career work in class, except perhaps teaching writing simple resumes. They did however, willingly assist a student if they had specific requests, especially help with writing applications. So all in all how much assistance a student received depended on which campus they were at, what the students in their class needed, the good will and time of their teacher or how much their teacher thought it was part of their responsibilities.

### **Working as a Pathways Advisor**

It was into this situation that I started work as a pathways adviser. It was funded under a MIPs program. I worked 0.6 and had administrative support for about 0.5. I shared a work and interview room with another MIPs worker who was very experienced and was an invaluable source of information about courses and other pathways. We tried to work on different days and times so that we kept to a minimum having 2 interviews at the same time, which was obviously not desirable though the furniture was arranged to best separate each section.

For the first year, what was done was dictated by the funding body. Much of my time was spent in one-to-one consultations, giving assistance in 4 main areas, which I will talk about in some detail.

If a student was not sure what career they wanted or if they wanted to look for a career change, especially if they had had few opportunities to freely choose in their own country, we would examine possible alternatives. Usually we used the Job Guide (online but sometimes from the free hard copy) or [www.myfuture.edu.au](http://www.myfuture.edu.au). Most students could give an answer to, "If I had a magic wand and you could have any job what job would you have?" I was amazed that their dream job was usually within their grasp, except for the occasional young student. This gave us a starting point, because even if they wanted to be a doctor despite a poor educational background, I would assist them to tease out what they wanted from this career and to work out how they could gain this from another career that was within their grasp.

Once they had a career decided upon we would then examine their pathways. I would stress that because of their varied backgrounds, both in terms of training and experience, two students wanting the same career may need to travel along quite different pathways. I always said that my job was to find the quickest, cheapest and most enjoyable

pathway to their career. Of these three aspects each student would have different priorities and this would also affect which pathway they took. We often started by looking at the TAFE directory either online or from the free hard copy. The course search on the VTAC site was also explored.

Then, once they had decided on the course they wanted, I gave them assistance in working out what to write on their PI forms or other applications, again looking at the job guide to assist them. Often they overlooked skills that they had, because they saw them as not relevant or were ones that every applicant had. Using the job guide as a yardstick, I got to know what kind of questions I needed to ask to draw out their skills and experiences.

The last main area of assistance was in helping some students find employment. We would look at employment sites and work on writing resumes. Again I needed to encourage them to add all their skills that we in Australia would see as being relevant to the job that they were applying for.

### **Outcomes and Reflections**

On the whole the program worked well. I had time to spend with the students that the teachers did not have. It however did not work very well if the teachers did not do career work in the classes as the students then did not see the need to think about future careers. To give the teachers their due, often the students were older and did not think they had much hope of finding work, especially the kind of work they had previously had in low skill areas. Much of my time was therefore spent in getting the students to think about their future. At some stage I almost felt that I was another person like the people from Centrelink hassling them to think about employment, rather than someone who was assisting them to reach their goals. I had to work at building up trust and to show that I was on their side.

For these reasons but also more because of my social work background where it was seen as better to provide community development rather than one-to-one assistance that was often called 'band-aiding' I tried to expand my role. I was concerned that I may be making the students dependent on me rather than assisting them to gain skills.

The first way of doing this was to act as a consultant to the teachers and to give them the information that I had, so that the career work could be more easily integrated into their classroom work. Also the information would be given by someone that the students already trusted, and did not necessitate a new person in their already crowded lives. This was a way of keeping the future in the minds of the students, especially, as mentioned earlier, not all students needed excellent English to move onto the next stage of their pathway. I collected and disseminated information

on aspects like Open Days, VTAC applications and Career workshops. I also gave answers to specific questions.

I assisted with the RMIT TAFE tasters for our ESL students in printing, aged care and electro technology. The students really enjoyed them, and even though few went immediately into these courses there were many benefits. Students saw that they could cope in a mainstream course, especially a practical one, albeit one with other ESL students. It also reminded them that they had skills. In English classes they were often more aware of what they could not do, rather than what they could. These tasters were however very expensive, costing about \$3000 each for a 2–3 day course, with classes of 15. The funding for this came from another source within RMIT.

I also assisted the teachers by putting Internet links to numerous sites on Blackboard, the Internet site that each class had. Besides being a resource that the teachers could use, it also allowed the students to be more independent when they came to see me, as once shown they could go back to look at these sites.

Besides assisting with the past student talks, I also had some money to organise other speakers who spoke on issues such as networking to obtain a job. These were not expensive, costing about \$100 each.

At the beginning of 2008 initially there was no money to run the pathways program and so the work was put back onto the teachers. Those that had incorporated career planning into their classroom took up much of my role with their students. By then, many had much of the necessary knowledge or ways of finding it out. Where teachers did not believe that it was part of their role, the students went back to receiving little assistance. This sounds unfortunate, but I had come to realize that much of my effort was spent in getting the students to visit me and to get them to start thinking about their careers. For the effort I was putting in, the students were not gaining very much. Career assistance separate from the classroom work and culture was not very productive.

I moved back into the classroom and worked on a program to incorporate employability skills into a specific ESL classroom. This led to establishing a dual certificate course of Certificate III in ESL and Certificate II in Printing and Graphic Arts. The latter is a general course that leads into apprenticeships in Graphic Pre Press, Printing or Post Press. In some ways the course is a bit like a long TAFE taster. In many ways this course has worked well and most of the students are likely to get into Certificate IV courses in these areas. What has worked particularly well is that the VET teachers have been able to work at the students'

English level. If anything, the teachers have been too accommodating and so there was less need for the English backup to assist them to learn what was needed. What was required in Printing was adjusted down rather than using the ESL classes to move the students up to the required level. The students were focused on their careers pathways and so it was very easy to incorporate it into the class lessons. Unlike other dual certificate courses they still needed to make career decisions.

What also assisted them to make the career decisions was the work experience. They did a Practical Placement course (subject) as part of the Certificate III in ESL. They only went for five days, generally done by going one day a week for five weeks. Besides helping them clarify their career goals it had other benefits. They got to use their English in a purposeful way. They all enjoyed the placements and came alive in a way I had not seen before. It was so pleasing to hear them praised, by their employers, for their many skills. They will be able to give this evidence of their skills when they are writing their applications for courses. All now have an Australian referee as well.

## **Future Recommendations**

I am therefore very positive about extending practical placements to some of our other courses as a way of assisting students along their career paths. However I was not so positive just before they went out. Except for Certificate IV in ESL (Professional) for Overseas Qualified nurses, my unit has not done practical placements in our ESL programs, so I was mostly starting from scratch. I did all the searching for, researching and contacting the potential placements. Needless to say, this was very time consuming. Although I had some extra time when the students were at placement, this did not equal the time spent in establishing the placements. Because the students were not involved in the research and negotiation of their placements, they felt that they were providing favour rather than vice versa.

Next time, to reduce the above problems, I would make the following changes:

- The students would find about five possible places asking people, using the phone book and Internet sites that list local businesses and organisations
- They would check if they could relatively easily get to these places
- They would do an Internet search on each organisation to find out what products or services the place provided, so that I would know a little about the place that I was phoning.

This would save a lot of time. It would also give the students a purposeful research activity to do in the classroom that would help focus them on what career they might like. Also

they would ‘own’ the placement more and possibly have a more realistic idea of what most organisations felt about student placements.

As with the pathway advising, this dual certificate course may not continue because of funding issues. Trade courses need small class size, but my unit has budget constraints, which require that we have at least 20 students in each class.

So the way of assisting students along their career pathways will change again. My journey started with teaching ESL without any real assistance in the career area. I then moved gradually to doing more and more in the classroom to being a pathway adviser where I was only concerned with students’ careers. I have reached the conclusion that the career work is best done and ESL teaching must be fully integrated, even though the students do not always feel ready. It is the teacher

who knows them and so is able to make it relevant to where they are up to, and can move in and out of it according to the students’ needs and wishes. I am not recommending the old English for Employment where there was too much Employment content, which easily became boring. It is with this in mind that the English and Further Study Unit now has a very successful program of career pathways work, which is integrated with the students’ coursework. This was established and is run by other teachers. As such, it is the topic of another *Fine Print* article, which hopefully will be in a future issue.

**Margaret Hanrahan** is an ESL teacher who worked as a career adviser at RMIT TAFE from 2006–7. In 2008 she worked on a project on ways to incorporate employability skills into an ESL classroom. Now, she works as an ESL teacher in a dual certificate course of ESL/ Printing and Graphic Arts.

#### ... continued from page 8

**Delia Bradshaw** has worked in adult education in Victoria for nearly thirty years. She is a writer, teacher, mentor, researcher, editor, curriculum advisor, panel chair and workshop presenter. She has worked in a wide range of contexts, including ACE neighbourhood learning centres, TAFE institutes, ACFE regional councils, community agencies, government bodies, professional organisations and university education faculties. E-mail: [deliab@bigpond.com](mailto:deliab@bigpond.com)

This is an edited version of a keynote address presented at E-Learning Showcase 2009: Celebrating good practice in e-learning in ACE in Melbourne on the 20th March 2009. An audio/slide version of this conference presentation can be found at <http://eshowcase.acfe.vic.edu.au/Bradshaw>.

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#### Glossary

ACE Adult Community Education

ACEWEB Cluster Project—ACE ‘collectives’ promoting collaborative educational provision and professional development

ACFE Adult Community and Further Education

ACMI Australian Centre for the Moving Image

ALBE Adult Literacy and Basic Education

CGEA Certificates in General Education for Adults

ESL English as a Second Language

NLT New Learning Technologies

NMRACFE Northern Metropolitan Region Adult Com-

munity and Further Education  
PRACE Preston Reservoir Adult Community Education  
RMIT Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology  
VALBEC Victorian Adult Literacy and Basic Education Council

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# Practical matters

## Another Community of Practice?

By Mary-Ann Tonini and Sue Neale

From the regular drives to Melbourne, to the sharing of resources and ideas, to the opportunity to think deeply about their teaching practice, Mary-Ann Tonini and Sue Neale reflect upon their experience of the Adult Literacy and Numeracy in ACE Capability Building Project.

"Not another Community of Practice". It has to be said that we approached this venture with a certain degree of cynicism. The Community of Practice seemed to be the cheap and cheerful fix-all in the adult learning sector these days. On the other hand, how often do we even meet colleagues in the adult literacy and numeracy field, in the country, let alone be offered the opportunity to meet with peers and share stories and insights?

We were invited to apply to be part of the Community of Practice with the startlingly catchy title of *Adult Literacy and Numeracy in ACE Capability Building Project*. We assumed that only one representative from our organisation would be accepted. I teach literacy and Sue teaches numeracy at our learning centre in North Central Victoria. The fact that we were both accepted turned out to be one of the best things about the experience for a number of reasons. It meant that we were able to share the driving. We made six trips to Melbourne over an eighteen-month period. Each time we completed the six hours of driving, we were able to discuss our work and the Community of Practice, reflect on our teaching practices, consider new techniques, enjoy lunch together and share insights from the reading that we had done as preparation for the meetings.

Our expectations were high because people from CAE were running the initiative. We expected to meet experts in the field and we did. We met someone who was not only familiar with the current research in the adult literacy and numeracy field, but seemed to have committed most of it to memory. We played maths games that were both hands-on and meaningful. We not only talked about good teaching practice but we experienced it, which makes a refreshing change. We looked at the ACSF and loved it, and we talked about ways to integrate policy, research and practice as well as task design and moderation.

We left 'at sparrows' for the journey to the big smoke, keen to get the most out of our day. We tried not to be unduly impressed by the sumptuous tea caddy and the well equipped training rooms as well as the busy hum of the CAE.

We were intrigued by the diversity of the group. Some people were very new to the field. Some were working with very specific learner groups such as vision-impaired learners,



Mary-Ann Tonini and Sue Neale

learners with MIDs and older men. We were introduced to a wealth of current research in the adult literacy and numeracy field. Our participation in this group gave us the time to read and to think about what we do in a way that we wouldn't normally have time to in our over-committed working lives.

A feature of the Community of Practice was the emphasis on us as active participants. We were asked to give feedback on a new wiki and we experimented with communicating as a group online with some success.

It turned out that the most pressing need participants felt was for resources, so this became the focus of the group;

# Practical matters

to link theory to practice and to then develop and publish transferable resources for adult literacy and numeracy practitioners.

We talked about what interested us in the group and then went back to work and fiddled around until we came up with something that we thought was presentable. Then came the somewhat daunting moment when you stand up in front of your peers and say, 'This is what I do.' This can seem very difficult at first. It is useful as a teacher to remember how it feels to be a learner who is unsure of themselves.

The range of different approaches was startling. We chose to use magazines as a stimulus for our activities because almost everyone could choose a magazine that interested them. Over six months, we worked on putting together a set of integrated literacy and numeracy tasks aimed at Certificate II in General Education for Adults that could be used sequentially or as stand alone tasks and we trialled each one of them in the classroom. We listened to our students for feedback and ended up making quite radical shifts in our teaching practice as a result.

Others worked on developing personal interest zines, T-shirt making, an online history, and readers for older men. These

resources can now be accessed at <http://adultliteracy.acfe.vic.edu.au>

The challenges for us have been: to stick with it, to engage with our peers, to try new things, to improve our practice, to broaden our knowledge and to apply for an Adult Literacy and Numeracy in VET qualification if we chose to.

Perhaps the most valuable part of our experience has been the opportunity to think deeply about how and why we do what we do and to learn to do what we do better. It has been quite exhilarating to view ourselves as skilled professionals. We felt encouraged that ACFE provided this valuable experience, which we believe will have ongoing benefits for adult literacy and numeracy practitioners. We would definitely recommend that others jump at such an opportunity if it arises.

**Mary-Ann Tonini and Sue Neale live on farms in Northern Victoria and have worked together at Kyabram Community and Learning Centre since 2004. They teach anyone who needs a second chance at basic education. They use hands-on tasks to engage their students and integrate literacy and numeracy. Their aim is success for everybody.**

## A Renewed Sense of Motivation

*By Diane Walker*

**The Community of Practice—providing opportunity for reflection, research and renewal. Diane Walker explains.**

As I look back on my participation in the ACE Capability Building Project, and try to record my experience in writing, I realise the positives for me, both as an adult literacy practitioner and a learner, have been manyfold.

My first reaction to my manager's request to join the Community of Practice was one of extreme self-doubt. Thoughts of 'I can't do this', 'I've never done anything like this before' and 'I've never been to Melbourne on the train', raced through my mind. I realised how readily I could identify with my students and empathise with their fears as adults finding themselves in an unknown environment and having to take risks with their learning. However, all these initial fears were resolved, and being a member of the ACE project has definitely been an extremely rewarding experience for me.

It was the initial request by the facilitators of the project for group members to select, read and reflect on a number of

the publications on the NCVER website that immediately interested me. It confirmed my hope that participation in the project was going to be personally valuable. Our everyday work in the classroom requires a great deal of planning and documentation. Time is spent planning units of work and individual sessions, researching authentic texts, information and ideas, developing reading and writing tasks, and organising appropriate assessment. Very little time, for me anyway, seems to be available for the professional development and academic reading that I have always enjoyed. Being part of the project enabled me to read lots of this text type at my leisure.

I read and reflected on quite a few of the publications on the NCVER website (one that I had not accessed before but would now highly recommend) and they all made me re-think my practice in the classroom and look at the big picture of adult literacy and numeracy education, its importance and value, in a refreshed light. In particular,

# Practical matters

a text entitled, *Working from strengths—Venturing towards strength-based adult education*, was a revelation. Here in print, was affirmation of what I have always believed, and hopefully practised. Within course outlines and assessment requirements, I have always worked with students encouraging them to build on their strengths and improve their skills, abilities and sense of self-worth. However, this text gave the knowledge, the tools, the questions to ask, and most importantly, the insight to improve my practice and thus help my students even more in their learning journey. It was an inspiring read.

Individual project member's research was reported back to the whole group, shared and discussed, and from my point of view, it was this networking with others that was one of the most worthwhile aspects of the whole experience. At my provider, I am a sessional teacher and even with colleagues, we are like ships in the night. To travel to Melbourne and meet with the facilitators and other practitioners from a wide variety of adult learning contexts, over a series of meetings, was a wonderful experience in itself. I think, as adult literacy and numeracy teachers, we are always hungry for new ideas, knowledge of different resources, more interesting ways to meet the needs of our students and news of what others are doing in their workplace and classrooms. I met dedicated, enthusiastic practitioners and I learnt so much just by listening, interacting with others, and being part of the learning environment itself.

After carrying out individual research, it was time to establish working groups and achieve our goal—the production of sample units of work, programs and resources to complement the CGEA and other relevant curriculum, and thus provide teachers with new materials to support their practice and their students' learning. This is where the huge learning curve for me began.

A lot of the credit for the ACE Capability Building Project being such a positive and worthwhile experience for me must go to my partner, Jean Evans. Jean works at CAE and I must admit I relied heavily on her guidance and knowledge and was motivated by her enthusiasm. We worked together through telephone calls, emails and some trips to Melbourne to meet at CAE. Straight away I was hooked by Jean's suggestion of a topic. The topic chosen for our project was, The Victorian Gold Rush and we developed our resources for CGEA Certificate 1: Events in Australian History and

Certificate 1 in ESL Frameworks: Australian History. I have always been interested in Australian history, and living in Bendigo, with Ballarat just down the road, the heritage of the 1850s gold rush period is all around me.

Although, as always, lack of time in the day was an issue, and deadlines always seemed to be looming, I enjoyed every minute of the research and reading I had to do for our project. It was definitely a challenge to come up with the ideas for the three main topics and accompanying handouts that I worked on. Altogether, we put together a multitude of ideas for class activities, reading and writing tasks and handouts for six topics, under the title "Victorian Gold Rush, that will hopefully provide teachers with loads of inspirational material to use in their classrooms.

My computer skills are definitely lacking. I would type up my topic activities and handouts the best I could, email them to Jean and then somehow, miraculously I think, she would transform them to match her work. She has produced an excellent, professionally presented document. To see the culmination of my ideas and work in print was very self-satisfying and gave a great sense of achievement

Although it is difficult to explain, working on our chosen project gave me an exciting opportunity to read different genres again. Visits to the library, lots of reference work and the gaining of knowledge, accessing informative and interesting websites, and receiving emails from people providing helpful information all served to emphatically stress the importance of life-long learning and the enjoyment it can bring, not only for me but for the students I work with. It sounds a bit dramatic, but it gave me renewed motivation!

Thus on reflection, despite my initial reservations, being part of the ACE Capability Building Project group has been an interesting, rewarding experience. It has been an experience that has not only rekindled and reinforced my love of history, reading, research, literacy teaching and working with adult learners, but also one that has enabled me to meet many wonderful practitioners dedicated to, and enthusiastic about, the adult education field we all work in.

**Diane Walker is an adult literacy teacher at Continuing Education in Bendigo, who recently participated in the ACE Capability Building Project.**

# Technology Matters

## Teaching Information Technology to ALBE Students

By Julia Hanna

**How do we achieve success in teaching Information Technology to ALBE students, despite the different levels of computer skills that exist within any class? Julia Hanna provides some answers.**

The fundamental problem facing ALBE teachers teaching computer skills is not lack of equipment, resources and the latest technology. It is how to teach these skills to students who vary so significantly in their computer skills. The challenge within an ALBE classroom lies predominantly with the fact that many students, particularly those at the initial level of CGEA, still cannot read or comprehend basic instructions, which makes a lot of written step by step instructions, obsolete. Furthermore, in one class you may also have a majority of students for whom English is their second language or those who have never used a computer before. Poor attendance and limited or no access to a personal computer at home is also a huge liability, as students are unable to retain and use the skills and information they have learnt from week to week. These factors can create an environment that can be very challenging for an ALBE teacher to create meaningful and successful learning experiences.

As a teacher of an introductory computer class and a computer elective containing beginner level to advanced students, I have had first-hand experience of the difficulties in creating tasks and managing a classroom with such a diversity of skill levels. Teaching a computer class is no easy task. However there are ways in which an activity can be adapted to suit all learners, providing enough scaffolding for some and enough enrichment activities for others. After many trials and tribulations, I have worked on how to best achieve this result with my computer elective class. The problems I faced initially were:

- There were three different skill levels in my class—beginner, intermediate and advanced
- The majority of my students were at the beginner level
- The majority of students needed one-to-one assistance with their work.

At the start of the term I taught a skill followed up with a related exercise. The advanced students completed these tasks quickly whilst the beginners struggled and fell behind. As there was only one teacher and 16 students, I struggled to meet all their needs. Frustration on their part and my part ensued. After a lot of careful consideration and reflective thinking, I devised a way in which all the learners in the class could benefit from each computer session.

It occurred to me that all students, either in a computer class or not, work at their own pace. In order for my class to be successful I needed to embrace this concept and create a project that would encompass this. I did however recognise that I also needed to build upon the skills of my learners and provide them with the tools for being successful without overloading them. With this in mind, I realised that the skills I taught must be in line with the needs of the learners. It was important to not set the bar too high but teach small skills that would give the student success for each component of their project.

After navigating and reviewing a page of interactive websites suggested to me, I chose one website that I thought would provide a great basis for a project on Australia; a broad topic that could include history, geography, famous people, animals and landmarks. The site I chose for my students that was easy to navigate and access was: <http://www.kamcom.co.nz/australia/index.htm>

Through focusing on just one website, students grew familiar with the process of navigating a website and extracting the appropriate information from it. Once the students' familiarity with the website had been established, I then set out to create a project that would use all the components of that website—the categories, pictures, graphs and key information which the students would need to use in order to complete their project.

I divided the project into tasks—tasks one to five, estimating that it would take most students one to two weeks to finish each task. Ideally, the project could be completed by the end of the term. After each session, students would save their work and print off their completed tasks. Students seemed to gain confidence through seeing the progress they made each week. I tried to encourage and positively reinforce the work they had done without being too critical of minor technical problems of layout, font and spacing. The emphasis was on their development, and improvement would be demonstrated through the end product and the progressive development of students' skills from week to week.

The aim of the project was twofold; students would acquire a set of skills taught over a series of lessons due to the fact

that each skill was necessary to complete a component of the project. At the same time they would be deepening their content knowledge of some aspect of the main topic. For instance, if the next task in the project was to create a table in which they had to write bullet points on six Australian animals, they would be given a tutorial at the beginning of the lesson before using these skills in their project task. All of the learning outcomes for the module 'Can Operate a personal computer' could subsequently be covered in each session as part of the skill or skills taught to achieve the next task in the project.

For the advanced students who worked through the project more quickly, the emphasis was to gather further

information from other websites to add to their body of work. This meant that they worked more independently and productively through utilising the skills they already had in order to create a more polished result. The most advanced students created Power Point presentations of the project.

No one factor determines the success of an ALBE computer class, but patience, repetition and positive reinforcement through the continuation of an ongoing task has proven to be a successful formula in teaching students working at all ability levels.

**Julia Hanna is an ALBE teacher based at NMIT in Preston**

The following story recently appeared in the *Student Writing Edition of Fine Print*. Unfortunately, an error occurred in crediting the writer—our apologies for the mistake. We take this opportunity to reprint the story here.

### **A Day In The Life Of A Soldier**

By Brooke

13/10/1969

Day 37

Tom Johnson

Another day in Vietnam, carrying 25 kilos on my back while walking through the dark and enveloping bush, being careful not to make a sound in case the enemy is lurking. I'm too terrified to blink. A second here is like a year at home. I'm missing my wife Linda a lot. Not being able to hold her in my arms. She has our baby boy in two weeks. I wish I could be there for her.

Enemy booby traps claimed two of our men today. This is getting too much. The sound of the firing guns, bombs dropping and helicopters circling our main camp for hours in search of any danger is becoming unbearable. We have located one of our enemy's main bases. Tomorrow we go into battle. Many of our men will die. Senior Sergeant says we need to prepare ourselves, but how can you prepare yourself to watch hundreds of men die?

15/10/1969

Day 39

Yesterday.

Yesterday.

I can't breathe. It's as though I'm paralysed, scared so deeply within. The blood, the screaming, the incredible stench of death surrounds me. Senior Sergeant said to prepare. I don't think anyone could. My close friends Kenny, Bill and Todd all died today along with 50 other men. One soldier was taken by the enemy. We fear he may be kept for information. I'm exhausted, I want to sleep but I can't. Every time I close my eyes I re-live the vivid images, smells and sounds. I go home in two months, if I can make it that long.

1/12/1969

Linda Johnson

Today is the one-month anniversary of Tom's death. He was on his way home when the enemy made an attack on his helicopter. Thankfully he died instantly and didn't suffer like many of his men. He was going to meet our baby boy. He would have been home in time for the birth. To think my son will never see, touch, feel or hear his own father's voice haunts me to my inner core. I lay awake and cry most nights and I struggle to get out of bed most mornings. Tom was the love of my life, the centre of my universe. How can I live without him?

**Brooke is a CGEA student at Chisholm Institute Cranbourne.**

# Beside the Whiteboard

Amber McLeod, a teacher based in regional Victoria, recently spoke with Lynne Matheson, co-president of VALBEC and member of the *Fine Print* Editorial Committee. She described her involvement in adult education, some very memorable teaching moments outside the classroom and her plans for the future.

## Where are you working currently and which programs do you teach?

Education Centre Gippsland (ECG) in Warragul teaching Certificates of General Education for Adults, Victorian Certificate of Adult Learning and Certificates in Spoken and Written English.

## Can you tell us a bit about your professional background and career pathway?

I found my grade 3 workbook recently where I had written “When I grow up I want to be a teacher”! Somehow I ended up with a science degree and worked as a food microbiologist for a few years before I did my Dip Ed. I was lucky enough to be able to do ESL as a method along with science even though I didn’t have the prerequisites for it because La Trobe University was trying to get more science graduates into ESL. After teaching CSWE for a while I realized I didn’t actually know enough about English so I did a Masters in Linguistics! I’ve been fortunate enough to work in Japan and Brunei teaching in government high schools and I’ve worked in adult education in Victoria for about 10 years, 5 of those at ECG in Warragul.

## What has influenced you in terms of pedagogy/teaching practice?

I base my practice on seeing and responding to the real day to day needs of students by getting to know them. Once you realise that materials can help but must be selected for the particular student or group of students, and that having students doing a wide variety of activities to make learning realistic are the key elements to successful teaching.

## What have been some of the challenges and highlights of working in adult literacy and language education?

The different lifestyles, family situations and expectations of students mean we need to be very diplomatic. A variety of learning difficulties and learning styles have been the causes of people not progressing through school so we need to build a learning environment based on trust before they can begin to succeed in language and literacy acquisition.

## How did you become involved in adult basic education?

As part of my job as a food microbiologist I had to teach the employees about hygiene. A lot of the people working in the factories were migrants and I really enjoyed working with them so I decided to do some volunteer tutoring with AMES and eventually ended up teaching CSWE. When

I moved to Warragul, I was initially employed to teach literacy in CGEA but I’ve now taught nearly every unit in CGEA, VCAL and CSWE, as there is a general shortage of teachers in this area.

## What have been some of your best teaching experiences?

I think all my best experiences have been out of the classroom! Each time we venture outside the classroom, opportunities to learn seem to burst around every corner. It also gives you a real insight into what the students actually know or need when you see them in a real life situation. The CSWE students have been to the scary local pub to have coffee and cake; a CGEA student took me for my first (and last) game of Bingo one afternoon; I went to support a VCAL student racing cars; I have taken students to local schools to do presentations; we have had cultural lunches where students from CGEA, VCAL and CSWE have cooked for each other—we even had some students present a cooking class. I think my recent favourite was taking a student to have her hair cut by our hairdressing students in another town. It was a half hour drive and the student—who rarely spoke in class—told me her life story! At the end of the trip I asked her what had made her so chatty and she told me that she just didn’t like classrooms—needless to say we have been on many more excursions since then!

## What is it like working in a regional centre?

Fantastic! The class sizes are much smaller and so you have the chance to focus on each student’s particular needs. Being in a smaller community also means that you tend to become more involved in students’ day to day lives. Our children go to the same schools so I often pick up students’ children while they are working or they baby sit for me over the school holidays! There is also a greater chance to mix students from different courses for guest speakers or excursions. And as I mentioned before—you get to have a go at teaching all kinds of subjects! I also have a fantastic boss—Helen Uliando—who is very flexible when it comes to my kids’ sick days!

## What are some of the challenges of working with younger students?

They are young! They are still growing up and finding their place in life. Often they are so consumed with other areas of their lives that it is very hard to engage them or keep them focused. Of course all those energy drinks don’t help!

**What do you see as the main issues for ALBE practitioners in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?**

Training versus teaching! We are often criticized by other ECG teachers of training packages when it comes to validating our assessment tasks because we are not specific enough. It is hard to explain to the rest of the organisation that because our students have such diverse interests and needs we need to be very general and that we can't use the same assessment tasks every year because we often have the same students or new students with completely different interests! We seem to spend an inordinate amount of time doing paperwork; complying with various rules and assessing when we could be spending this time teaching what the students actually need to learn which is often not in the curriculum.

**What role has new technologies played in your development of teaching and learning strategies?**

I am a big fan of computers as a way to engage students—particularly the younger students. I find that students that may not be otherwise engaged think of computers as fun. We have had great success using "Mathletics" with

the students—they actually cheer when they have Maths! There are so many interesting things you can incorporate into your subjects. We used "Gamemaker" and had our own "Game on" exhibition after an excursion to ACMI. We are getting VCAL students to make TV, radio and internet "advertisements" for PD2. We recently got our first interactive whiteboard, which is a big hit with the students. Some of our Senior VCAL students are doing an online unit delivered through the ECG Moodle site. We are also planning to set up a virtual business and have our VCAL students run it for part of their Work Related Skills unit.

**What advice do you have for new teachers?**

Always keep in mind that your students may have more experience than you in many areas!!

**What lies ahead for you?**

I was lucky enough to be awarded an industry scholarship to do a PhD looking into the reasons why girls are less inclined to be interested in ICT careers, which I will start at the end of this term.

**... continued from page 14**

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**Bev Campbell, Snoeks Desmond and Lynne Matheson at the recent VALBEC twilight forum on the Family Literacy Project**

# From over the Border

## The View from the Cottages

By Alex Williams

Alex Williams currently works as a literacy lecturer at the Alice Springs Correctional Centre, teaching in the low security area known as the Cottages. Here, she describes her experience of working in a custodial setting.

After five years in remote and rural China working as an EFL teacher and teacher-trainer through an international development agency, I felt ready for a new challenge back home in Australia. For a long time I had been interested in central Australia and was keen to work with Indigenous adult students. So, moving to Alice Springs seemed like the most logical and natural next step for me.

I started off working as a literacy and ESL lecturer at an Indigenous tertiary institution, a job that took me to many remote Aboriginal communities in the central desert region. I felt very fortunate to have the opportunity to work in these communities as it gave me an insight into the lives of Aboriginal people in central Australia, something that most other Australians only glimpse through the eyes of the media.

After several years in this role, I took up a position as a literacy and numeracy lecturer at the Alice Springs Correctional Centre, where I am currently working. The centre is located about twenty-five kilometres south of Alice Springs and has the capacity for approximately 400 prisoners, most of whom are Indigenous men. Prisoners of all security classifications are accommodated here and education programs are accessible to prisoners in all areas.

The education team consists of a Senior Education Officer, four literacy and numeracy lecturers, an art lecturer and a music lecturer. Most of the education programs are delivered inside the main prison complex, where medium and maximum security prisoners are accommodated. However, I work in the low security area known as the Cottages, which is located a short distance beyond the perimeter fence. Prisoners at the Cottages are afforded more personal freedom compared to other prisoners in the centre; this particular section operates with relatively minimal officer supervision and prisoners are responsible for their own cooking and cleaning. Some prisoners at the Cottages also have the opportunity to participate in supervised work programs in Alice Springs, which is intended to help them reintegrate after release.

At the moment my class consists of twelve students, although student numbers fluctuate quite considerably throughout the year due to the Cottages serving mostly as short-term accommodation for prisoners who are coming to the end of their sentences. All of the students I currently teach are Indigenous men, mostly in their twenties and thirties, from remote communities around Alice Springs and Tennant Creek. They are undertaking Certificates in Vocational Literacy and Numeracy, both of which are accredited training courses. We work together in a well-equipped training room, which has the usual classroom furniture, plus a TV and DVD player and six recently acquired desktop computers. As much as I am able, I try to encourage the students to take ownership of the training room space, and to that end, the walls are adorned with laminated samples of their work, as well as a lot of posters of their local community Aussie Rules teams!

The students are absolutely passionate about AFL and I use their love of the game to keep motivation and interest levels up. The students read profiles and news articles about players, interpret and compare player and game statistics, write about their favourite teams and even write to the players themselves. When Liam Jurrah (aka the 'Warlpiri Wizard') became the first player from a remote central Australian Aboriginal community to be drafted into the AFL, the students at the Cottages wrote to him to offer their congratulations. I feel that these sorts of activities, in which students can actually use their literacy and numeracy skills in ways that are relevant to their lives, are the most successful and also give the students the motivation to keep persevering with their studies.

Listening to the students and encouraging them to share their stories is another way I try to keep them engaged. Finding opportunities for these learners to reach out to a wider audience has been a critical part of this approach. For example, several students were keen to write about their experiences growing up out bush for the recently published *Fine Print Student Writing Edition*. Learning that their work had been subsequently chosen for publication gave these learners a real thrill, something

that cannot be underplayed given a lifetime of difficulties engaging with mainstream education.

Despite these successes, there are challenges that come with teaching in a custodial environment. Opportunities to link literacy and numeracy practices with the real world are more limited compared to other teaching environments—excursions are obviously not an option and prisoners are not permitted access to the Internet. My colleagues and I often fantasise about the wonderful learning opportunities we could introduce into our training programmes via the World Wide Web, even if it was at a tightly restricted and controlled level. Mixed ability classes also represent a significant challenge, with lecturers working with some classes consisting of students ranging from preliminary through to NRS 3 level.

Even though these difficulties can sometimes stand in the way of maximising learning outcomes for students,

I feel very fortunate to be working in such a collegial environment where there is a continuous exchange of ideas, advice and resources amongst colleagues. Most rewarding though, is working with the students themselves. Even though progress can seem very slow at times, the perseverance and willingness of these learners helps keep me motivated. Teaching in a prison is something not everyone enjoys, but for me it has provided some very challenging but rewarding experiences, not to mention a new-found love for AFL.

**Alex has over eight years experience working in the adult education sector as an ESL/literacy/numeracy lecturer in locations as diverse as the UK, China and central Australia. Her professional interests include Indigenous adult education and cross-cultural classroom dynamics.**

# What's out there

## Reading the *Fine Print*

Rosie Wickert reviews, *Reading the Fine Print: A history of the Victorian Adult Literacy and Basic Education Council (VALBEC) 1978–2008*, written by Beverley Campbell.

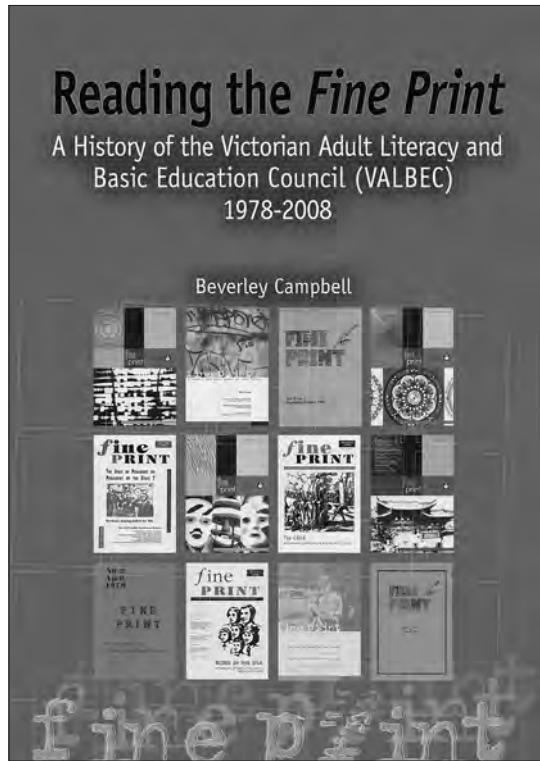
Earlier this year I was offered the extremely enjoyable task of launching Beverley Campbell's fine book, *Reading the Fine Print*. Apart from the many memories triggered by reading the book, the evening itself was a wonderful reunion of so many of the people central to the history told in the book. I was delighted to be reacquainted with the likes of Heather Haughton, Aileen Treloar, Sharon Coates, Helen McRae (or Gribble as I knew her), Daryl Evans, Rex Ennis, Peter Waterhouse, Delia Bradshaw, Audrey Grant, Jude Newcombe and many others. Through their interviews, it is their voices as well as Beverley Campbell's that populate this important volume.

This is the history of VALBEC through the 'eyes' of *Fine Print*. This history, however, is much bigger than VALBEC's history, not least because of the place of VALBEC and *Fine Print* in influencing and shaping adult literacy and basic education's development nationally. One has only to think of the national significance of the CGEA to get a sense of the impact of Victoria on the development of the field.

It is thus a big story that emerges through these pages, but inevitably it is also a very personal one. The book is the story of Beverley Campbell who, over her 25 years involvement, has and continues to occupy differing spaces in relation to adult literacy and basic education. Certainly she is an active member of VALBEC, including serving as President, and a regular contributor to *Fine Print*. She is also a teacher, a teacher educator and an academic. And she brings these various lenses to the task of writing this book.

Chapter One provides what Campbell calls 'theoretical threads' that both inform our reading of the book and have informed understandings of the development of the field itself. Notions of discourse, identity and governmentality are rehearsed here. Using concepts such as these and drawing on relevant literature (and Campbell's doctoral studies) questions of theoretical interest are raised and these will be useful to those who wish to engage in more abstract debate about *Fine Print* and VALBEC's trajectory and the interplay between these fine institutions and adult literacy and basic education in Australia.

Nonetheless, this is not a highly theorised academic book and so will be accessible to a wide range of interested



readers. For example, those interested in a documentary history of *Fine Print* and VALBEC will find this in Section One; those interested in a broader account of the politics of literacy policy and pedagogy will find this in Section Two. Section Three explores the contexts for adult literacy and basic education such as feminism, industry and Indigenous matters.

Readers will be familiar, through other sources, with many of the events, debates and issues covered in these chapters. What is unique to this book is that these debates are explored through analysis of *Fine Print* and VALBEC, or VALC (Victorian Adult Literacy Council) as it was initially called. One of the key themes of the book concerns the role of these two institutions in the formation of the professional identity of adult literacy and basic education in Victoria and Campbell worries at the outset about how to 'do justice to the story'. Given the very ambitious scope of the aims of founders of VALBEC and *Fine Print* (see pages 28–30), this is a justifiable concern and one which Campbell meets well through her judicious balance of analysis and account.

The voices of many speak through the book, such as through the frequent extracts from *Fine Print* as well as snippets from many interviews, which create, as Campbell says, both an oral as well as a documentary history of its topic. One chapter is given over to the central place of volunteers in this history, tribute is paid at relevant points in the book to key pioneers and activists whose influence helped shape the development of adult literacy and basic education in Victoria. Section Four, *Poet's Corner*, gives voice to students and tutors via their poetry—both moving and humorous.

The book concludes by revisiting some of the concepts and notions introduced at the beginning. Particularly useful is how Campbell's summary of the interconnections between VALBEC and *Fine Print* and the forming of professional identity provide a way of talking about what a professional association is:

VALBEC is a forum where teachers learn to read and interrogate the professional texts which shape their subjectivity and where they learn to read themselves and others as adult literacy and basic education practitioners. Through participation in professional activities, teachers are apprenticed into the culture of adult literacy and basic education. Their sense of personal professional identity is formed. A professional organisation is where personal professional confidence is nurtured. (p.262)

The book's cover claims that this book 'tells a story of an organic organisation which has endured over thirty years through lean years and years of funding plenty, and through times of great expansion and change. It sets the development of this professional organisation in the broader social context of the times and as such offers an important contribution to the history of adult literacy education in Victoria'. I am happy to say that I thoroughly agree.

Rosie Wickert's involvement with adult basic education began in the 1970's as a TAFE teacher. In Australia she moved into teacher education and academic life at the University of Technology, Sydney. She has been President of ACAL and the NSW Council for Adult Literacy and Numeracy. Her publications include Australian Policy Activism in Language and Literacy (2001) Melbourne: Language Australia, co-edited with Professor Joseph Lo Bianco and No Single Measure (1989), the report of the first national survey of adult literacy in Australia. She is co-editor of Literacy and Numeracy Studies: an international journal in the education and training of adults.

To purchase copies of, *Reading the Fine Print*, go to the link on the VALBEC homepage—<http://www.valbec.org.au/RTFP/purchaseoptionsRTFP.htm>

## Digital Literacies: concepts, policies and practices

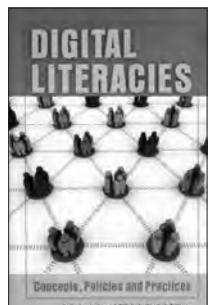
Michael Chalk reviews, *Digital Literacies: concepts policies and practices*, edited by Colin Lankshear & Michele Knobel and published in 2008.

Colin and Michele had an agenda. They were looking for writers who would explore the notion of digital literacies as social practice, because:

- understandings of digital literacy are diverse, and this has an impact on policy;
- socio-cultural perspectives on "literacy as practice"—which view literacies as plural—are strong and useful, so digital contexts need similar lenses; and
- educational learning benefits from an 'expansive view of digital literacies'.

This book gathers articles on the meanings and histories of digital literacies, the skills and understandings required to take part in our future worlds, the cultures of mashup and remix and also the literacies involved in participatory digital cultures such as Facebook and eBay.

Several authors here mention Paul Gilster as the first to outline the notion of digital literacy in 1997, with his explanation of 'an ability to understand and use information from a variety of digital sources', which he regarded 'simply as literacy in the digital age,' (Bawden, ch1: p18). While framing the contemporary need to adapt to new information technologies within the context of a long history stemming from Sumerian clay tablets, he insisted that the internet is just one of many information sources, and digital literacy is about the 'ideas and mindsets' that frame particular competencies. Gilster moved the concept along from a 'digital skills' view to one of 'mastering ideas, not keystrokes'.



After Johnson maps the cognitive skills required for internet use to Bloom's taxonomy of learning skills (ch2),

Fieldhouse & Nicholas explore the differences between information-savvy and information-literate, across various generations (ch3). They declare that while Gen Y may be information-savvy, research shows they often lack the skills needed to evaluate resources more critically, so ‘information professionals’ need to find hard data to push for more emphasis on these critical skills.

Buckingham wonders whether the many sub-literacy terms (eg media literacy) extend so far that we lose connection with original meanings, and the term ‘literacy’ becomes ‘a vague synonym for competence’ (ch4: p75). However, while asking whether ‘we really need yet another literacy’, he notes that ‘the term can bring a broader educational sense, similar to the German “Bildung” notion, rounded and humanistic’.

On policy, Rantala & Suaranta offer a Foucauldian analysis of governmentality, which leaves me scrabbling for evidence that I’m qualified to read this complicated academic morass (ch5). Current EU digital literacy policies suggest an ‘inclusive liberalism’, but these authors ask whether there is ‘any point emphasising the idea of multiple literacies, if the reality is defined by the tyranny of the market’.

Several early chapters explore perspectives on what digital literacy/ies can be: the skills and understandings needed for a range of contexts. The hair-splitting semantics across these chapters leave my head spinning. Not only is there little agreement on whether ‘literacy’ can be said to include all the various sub-departments—or whether we need to reframe everything in terms of multiliteracies or multiple literacies—but digital literacy itself is a cabinet with many drawers and shelves. Martin touches on this huge range of related terms, for example multiliteracies, multiple literacies, technoliteracies, as well as ‘silicon literacies’ and notes that Kress preferred to avoid the multiplicity experience, and rather ‘develop a new theoretical framework for literacy’ (ch7). Perhaps, the word literacy could contain all of this definitional mayhem after all.

For me the book comes alive with Allan Martin’s more enjoyable and accessible style (ch7). He examines various ‘literacies of the digital, ranging through:

- computer/ ICT literacy (from the late 60’s: specialist knowledge to control powerful machines);
- technological literacy (70’s: a need for the first world to compete with developing nations);
- information literacy (late 80’s: a library-based approach, not merely digital);
- media literacy (the ‘ability to make sense of all media and genre’);
- visual literacy (from 1969, via John Debes); and
- communication literacy (digital technologies can shape contexts of literacy and communication).

Martin has many challenging points. Our world is not ‘the digital society’ because our world is not ‘made by the digital’. Many current expressions, for example, electronic revolution, computer age and knowledge revolution, highlight the electronic nature of recent changes and contend that this is the essential quality of our new world. However reality is not so straightforward, and these metaphors have underlying messages which are misleading:

1. Social change is not determined by technology; rather social change enables technological change.
2. Labelling technology as the basis for change is a moral statement, enabling people to blame the tools.
3. The term “technological revolution” suggests that social change is always massive and unexpected, whereas in reality change is usually incremental and embedded in previous times.

According to Martin, the socio-political order is primarily continuous. Our world remains ‘hierarchical and unequal’ and the digital divide is just another dimension for inequalities already existing across the capitalistic hegemony. While identities are fragile in the ‘digitally infused world of late modernity’, discussion of digital literacies needs to move away from ‘listing of skills’ to the ‘role of the digital in the growth of the individual’.

From this point authors examine juicier concepts including remix, mashup, workplace blogging and the socio-textual practices of participatory digital cultures such as social networking or online shopping.

Efimova and Grudin compare the shifting social practices of instant messaging (IM) with those of email in its early days (ch9). They argue that while email has become a formalised and mission-critical social technology (which young people resist for those reasons), IM is likely to do the same in the near future. They also explore workplace blogging, finding that it has enabled people to share their passion for work and communicate directly with people both in and outside of their organisation.

Davies explores eBay and the worlds of online shopping through a socio-cultural lens (ch10). She shows how authenticity of narrative and characterisation have impact in product descriptions. Making powerful texts involves a consistent tone, apparent honesty and a direct approach. Noting that ‘texts are socio-cultural constructs’ and ‘literacy is primarily something people do’, Davies outlines the range of skills required to participate in the community. This is an interesting exploration, as she points out that goods gain value not only intrinsically, but through ‘taking part in an unfolding dramatic narrative’.

In the editors' own chapter on Facebook, they examine this 'Nth largest country' in terms of social practices, meaningful content, encoded texts, and participation in Discourses (ch11). Social networking sites are specialised interfaces in which people connect with others and 'manage diverse interpersonal interactions' via messaging systems across many different modes (eg audio, visual, gaming). 'New representational forms' where people re-use many different kinds of media signal 'a deep shift' in the way we interact with each other (Perkel).

The book finishes with another interesting chapter from Colin and Michele, where they remix the master of remix, Lawrence Lessig, from various sources including '*Free Culture: how big media uses technology and the law to lock down culture and control creativity (2004)*' (ch12). The chapter preface explains their authoring style: they have indulged in an academically justifiable game of copy/paste/sort to demonstrate that writing is one kind of cultural engagement we could call 'remix'. The tools of writing and remix have changed, and so have the practices.

Colin and Michele claim that this culture of remix is creating a new kind of democracy, based not on broadcast, but 'bottom-up' interaction where the masses speak to each other 'peer to peer'. Writing is now 'words with sounds and images and video—with everything our culture consumes.'

More detailed reading from various chapters can be found at <http://michalk.id.au/txt/tag/fine-print/> or via shortcut <http://sn.im/mic-fp>

Michael Chalk is an adult educator (language, literacy and numeracy) who supports teachers to use technology for classroom learning. He's been involved in state and national e-learning projects such as AccessACE e-Learning Research Circles and Community Engagement. More details at <http://michalk.id.au/>

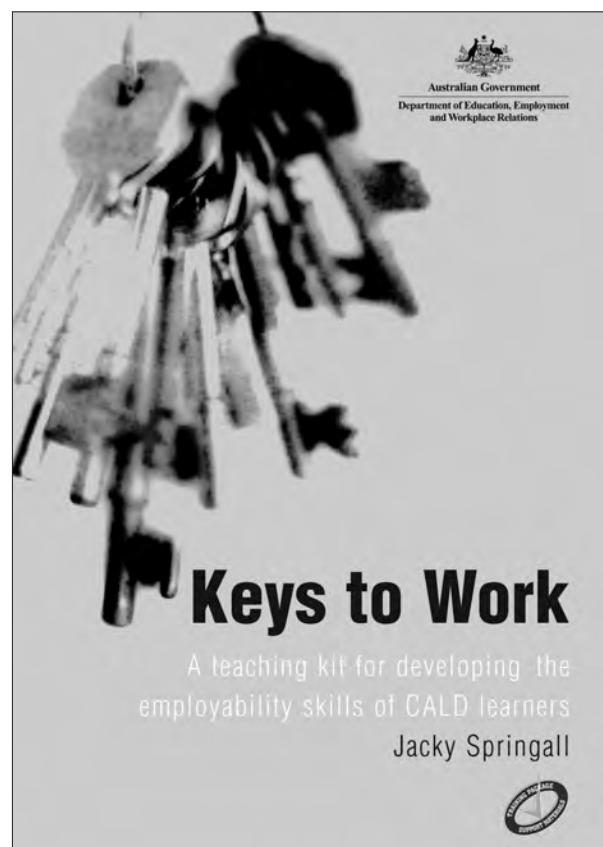
## Keys to Work: A teaching kit for developing the employability skills of CALD learners

Nic McLean and Julie Palmer review, *Keys to Work*, by Jacky Springall. This resource was developed by AMES and funded by the Department of Education and Employment and Workplace Relations.

*Keys to Work*, published in 2008, is a response to the Employability Skills Framework, which has recently become a core component of the VET system. This resource targets students from ESL backgrounds who are adapting to workplace culture and communication in Australia.

The kit comprises a teacher book with photocopyable student worksheets and a DVD. There are five parts to the teaching resource: understanding employability skills; employability skills and the Australian workplace; identifying and talking about your skills; classroom approaches; and employability skills in action.

The activities focus on vocabulary building and idiomatic language, as well as conversational English and pronunciation. The tasks are enhanced by the use of authentic texts and DVD scenarios set in a range of familiar workplaces. The activities give students an opportunity to work individually, in pairs and in teams.



The resource does not recommend a specific level of language proficiency. However it works best at a post beginner and lower intermediate level.

As well as the student tasks there are comprehensive teacher notes and information lists translated into seven languages: Arabic, Burmese, Mandarin, Dari, Dinka, Farsi and Vietnamese. The teacher notes include a number of useful websites and references to other resources.

In a program for young adults with refugee and migrant backgrounds this resource has its limits. Some of the job advertisements and workplaces featured are unlikely to be

relevant to the needs of low-level ESL/literacy learners. However, it does include well-designed tasks that require a minimal amount of pre-teaching and the scenarios create good examples of the employability skills in context.

In conclusion, this resource enables teachers to meet the challenges of delivering the Employability Skills Framework to students with major barriers to long-term employment.

Nic McLean and Julie Palmer both teach in YAMEC (Young Adult Migrant Education Course), Youth Unit, NMIT in Melbourne.

## Sound English—Reading Resources for pre-literate adults

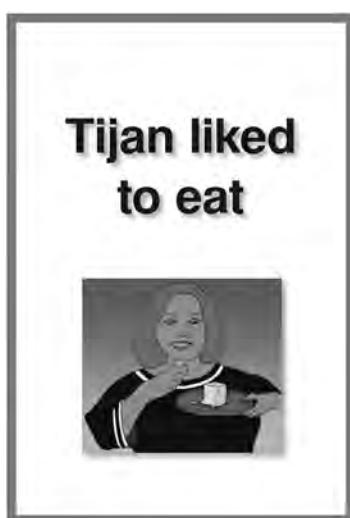
Tricia Bowen reviews, *Sound English*, a collection of reading resources for adults new to Australian English.

*Sound English*, written and produced by Rosemary McKenry and Bruce Mitchell, both experienced teachers, arose from the need to provide adults who are new to Australian English with suitable reading materials. The resource has been designed for adults newly arrived in Australia who are beginning to speak and read English, as well as for adults and secondary school aged students who experience difficulties with basic literacy.

The resource caters to learners at four levels: preliminary, and levels 1, 2 and 3. Both the preliminary and level 1 of the series are available now. It is intended that levels 2 and 3 will be available in 2010. *Sound English Software*, an enhancement to the Preliminary and Level 1 books, offering opportunities to hear and practise pronunciation, will also be available next year.

There are ten titles in the preliminary level set and 40 titles available in level 1. Each book contains tutor notes. These provide suggestions as to talking points that teachers may wish to raise and list the relevant phonemes and words that the resource introduces.

The stories are fun, light-hearted and contain themes and vocabulary that are relevant to adults in Australia. Illustrations are vibrant and reinforce the ideas introduced in the text. Titles in the series are varied, ranging from tales describing taking a child to kindergarten in, *Khan goes to Kinder*, to *Australians*, which offers a simple story presenting the multicultural face of Australia. One of my favourite stories in the Level 1 series, *A Big Mistake*, introduces the



idioms 'put my foot in it' and 'pull the wool over my eyes,' through a comical and simple story of a cheeky philanderer caught out by one of his girlfriends.

I recommend *Sound English* as a useful and relevant resource for both teachers and students. More information can be obtained via the website: [soundenglish.com.au](http://soundenglish.com.au)

