

this issue:

Teachers doing and *being*:  
what philosophy can  
teach us about our practice

By Tricia Bowen

Supporting the needs of  
young adult refugee students  
through narrative texts

By David Birch

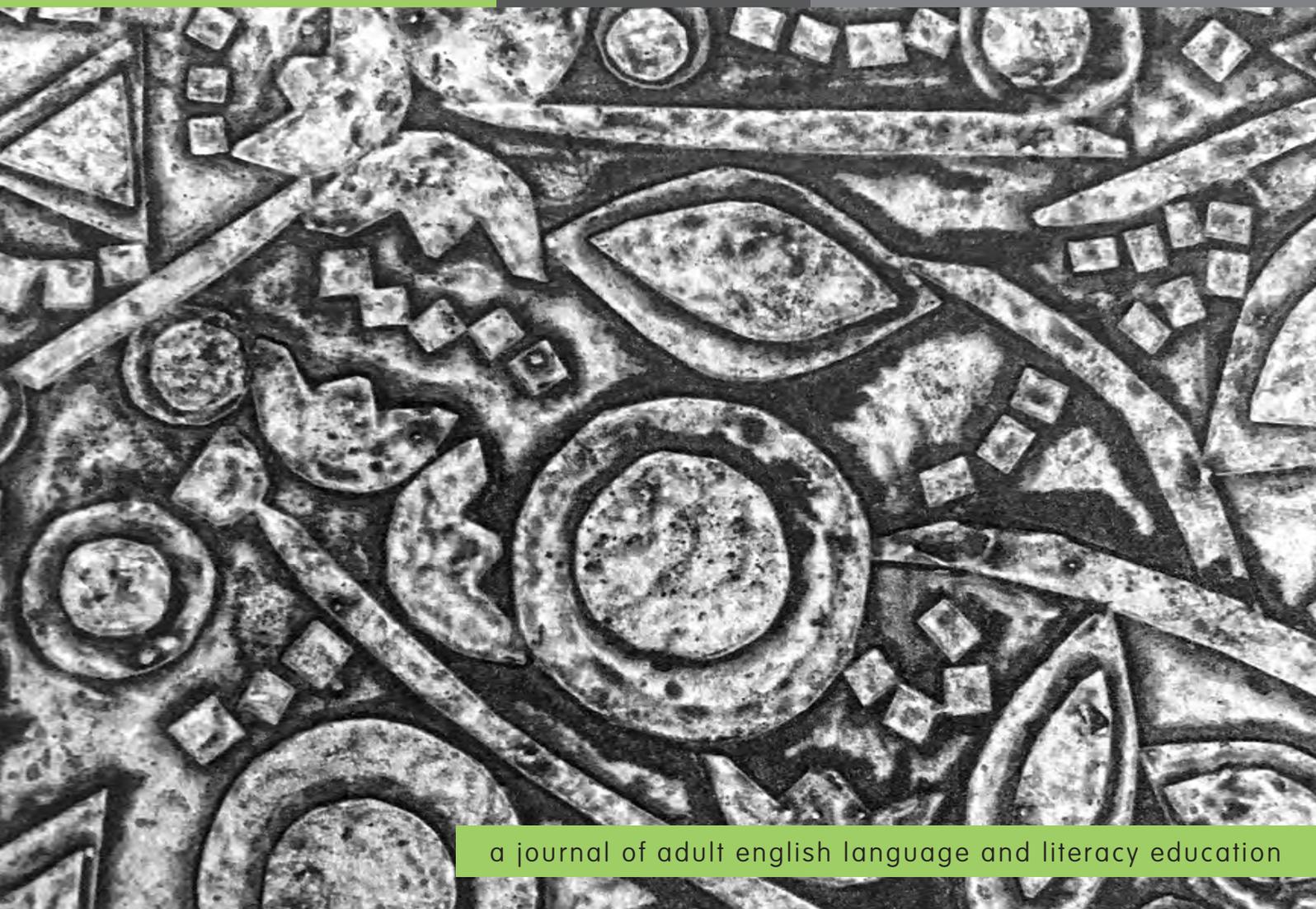
Delivering on policy: strategy  
influences on teaching,  
learning and formal assessment

By Lindee Conway

2016 vol: 39 # 3

fine  
print

valbec 



a journal of adult english language and literacy education

## Publication Details

Fine Print is published by the Victorian Adult Literacy and Basic Education Council Inc. (VALBEC). The opinions expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the Fine Print editorial group or VALBEC.

Fine Print is the registered journal of VALBEC:  
ISSN No: 0519-3978

This work is copyright. Apart from any use permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, or any amended Acts, no part may be reproduced by any process, nor may any other exclusive right be exercised, without the permission of VALBEC or the individual authors, unless explicitly set out in the provision below.

VALBEC grants permission to a user to reproduce, copy and communicate any articles within this publication for personal, research, study purposes or non-commercial purposes within an educational organisation. All use for teaching materials will automatically fall under Part VB of the Copyright Amendment Act 2002

Images provided by the author are used with permission by the copyright owner, unless otherwise attributed.

Editor: Lynne Matheson

Fine Print Editorial Group: Sarah Deasey, Linno Rhodes, Lindee Conway, Elizabeth Gunn, Manalini Kane.

Cover image: 'Abstract Flowers' Julie Manassis

Layout: Sarah Tuke

Printing: Melbourne Polytechnic Printroom

Editorial, advertising and subscription enquiries:  
info@valbec.org.au

## features

**Teachers doing and *being*: what philosophy can teach us about our practice** 3

*By Tricia Bowen*

**Supporting the needs of young adult refugee students through narrative texts** 8

*By David Birch*

**Delivering on policy: strategy influences on teaching, learning and formal assessment** 14

*By Lindee Conway*

## regulars

**Practical Matters** 19

Vox pops provides examples of some tried and true classroom activities; meet Graham with some activities to raise awareness about road safety.

**Numeracy Matters** 24

Pam Mahlis describes some engaging and fun measurement and estimation activities.

**Technology Matters** 26

Josie Rose applies her skills to enhance language learning in the Computer Assisted Language Learning classroom.

**Open Forum** 30

Linno Rhodes reflects on changes to the CGEA and the policy environment over the past decade.

**Foreign Correspondence** 34

Canadian educator, Kate Nonesuch shares insights from her blog, Working in Adult Literacy.

**Provider Profile** 36

The Southern Grampians Adult Education leadership team reflects on the success and strengths of the organisation.

**What's Out There** 39

Rhonda Pelletier suggests ways to work with the Namaste series of stories compiled by Keiron Galloway.

VALBEC acknowledges the financial support of the ACFE Board



Adult Education in  
the Community

# Editorial

When the first signs of spring appear in the garden or on the wind, I recall my grandfather reciting this snippet of a poem by Ogden Nash:

The spring is sprung, the grass is riz.  
I wonder where the boidie is.  
They say the boidie's on the wing.  
But that's absoid. The wing is on the bird.

I smile at its gentle humour and play on words. It illustrates the ambiguity and several meanings of so many of our English language words and phrases. For many of our students this diversity of meaning can seem confusing and often nonsensical. For teachers it makes for an ongoing challenge of making language meaningful, while at the same time tapping into what it means to be human.

In the first feature article, Tricia Bowen explores the role of the teacher in not just *doing* in the classroom, but finding ways of *being* with their students. She draws on several philosophers to pose questions that focus on identity and authenticity, for both teachers and learners. Interwoven through the article are experiences of teachers whom she interviewed for her research that highlight what it means to be a teacher.

David Birch describes a program that uses narrative texts working with young refugees settling in Australia.

With a focus on language development and new ways of experiencing the world through narrative texts, it has at its core emotional literacy, and the potential for growth and transformation.

A chance encounter at an ACAL conference sparked Lindee Conway's interest in New Zealand's approach to adult literacy and the strategies that have been implemented in recent years. A fellowship funded study tour enabled her to observe and compare approaches to learning and teaching that value the learner's experience, while meeting the needs of the initial assessment and placement requirements.

In our regular sections, there are multiple examples of insightful teaching practices which exemplify holistic approaches to engage students and establish positive and respectful learning environments. The concern of the teacher for the learners' needs and the role of emotions in learning emerge as themes throughout. The wealth of experience and knowledge represented in this edition truly reflects the transformative endeavours of so many people working in adult language, literacy and numeracy education. Enjoy reading over the summer, while taking a restorative break.

Lynne Matheson

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.

# Teachers doing and *being*: what philosophy can teach us about our practice

By Tricia Bowen



## Introduction

A teacher steps into a classroom and meets a group of adult literacy students for the first time. She looks at a collection of faces, strangers, all gazing back at her. These men and women come from different cultures, backgrounds and social classes. Along with pens and notebooks, they have brought with them expectations as to what is about to occur; what they hope to achieve; and how their lives, depending on their point of view, might be enhanced or rudely interrupted by this experience. So then, how might this teacher begin?

The first thing I do is find connections with the people there, find something that we have in common. I want the students to have success in what they're learning and to feel like they're achieving, so it's very important to know who they are and what they want to learn. If you can help people feel comfortable and safe, despite their memories of schooling, they can move forward. I don't think you can have any learning without some sort of knowing. That's what makes it easier for you and the students to jump off together into the learning.

So what is this getting to know, this ethereal component of teaching, to which she refers? And why does she consider it so important? After all, she tells us that getting to know her students is crucial, a necessary place from where she and her students can jump off into the learning together. And if this knowing is so important, as I suspect many other teachers think it is, then why aren't we taking the time to talk and think about it much more deeply?

In this article I'd like to examine these questions and offer some possible answers. In so doing, I'd like to share insights from a research project I've recently completed. This project aimed to explore what philosophers, both ancient and modern, can reveal to us about our practice.

## Building connections

In general terms, getting to know refers to a process of revelation, across *stranger-ness*. In an adult literacy

classroom, students might be asked to share snippets of information about themselves, their goals and their interests, thereby establishing an atmosphere of familiarity and ease. But if you recall, as well as referring to getting to know her students, this teacher also described the importance of building connections with them, finding things that they have in common.

This implies another dimension to the knowing. It tells us that it is a two-way process. This teacher is also willing to be known by her students. She is prepared to reveal little pieces of herself in order to build a relationship with them. When this teacher, or indeed any teacher walks into a classroom, in one way or another they declare small parts of themselves; their dispositions, their biases, their likes and their dislikes. So while the focus of a lesson might ostensibly rest on spelling rules or topic sentences, this teacher is not just *doing* in her classroom. She is also *being* with her students, just as they are *being* with her.

At present, teachers working in the Language, Literacy and Numeracy (LLN) sector, along with most other teachers, are operating in a culture where relentless reporting on outcomes is required. But the overriding priority embedded in all this reporting is focused exclusively on what teachers *do* with students; the content they deliver, the assessments they design and administer, the results they record. But if we accept that as well as doing, teachers are also being with students, then mightn't it also be useful that we take time to consider who we are when we teach, how we interact with our students, and how that might also contribute to the learning equation?

## Reframing practice

Teachers give considerable thought to the interpersonal dimension of their practice and how best to relate to their students. Yet by and large, this part of teaching is relegated to the status of a given, so that's where the thinking stops. There is no consideration paid to how a teacher's *being* with students, might also add layers to the learning, and how it might also contribute to ideals like success and

accountability. This crucial aspect of our work simply can't be pinned down inside training plans or performance matrices, so it is generally paid scant attention.

Perhaps what has also been missing is the means to assist us in thinking deeply and imaginatively about all this. What might be helpful is a way by which to frame our thinking, so we are able to reflect more creatively on the relational aspects of our work, and how that might influence what goes on in classrooms. If such a framework existed, then it is also more likely that this coming to know and being with our students, could finally be afforded the respect and recognition it deserves. My contention here is that philosophy can offer a framework, both rigorous and sturdy, to assist us with this thinking.

Philosophers pose questions that focus on who we are in the world and how best we might *be*, in order to flourish and reach our potential and a state of fulfillment and happiness. Their questions challenge us to think deeply about the very nature of our being, and what the idea of wellbeing looks like for each of us. It stands to reason then that ideas drawn from philosophy can support teachers in thinking about the possibilities embedded within their relationships with students. Philosophical thinking can expand notions of what it means to be accountable, beyond the narrow and singular view of all that gets done, to a richer, more authentic view, which puts who teachers might be, with and for their students, into the picture as well.

In the introduction to this article, I referred to a research project that I've just completed. This project aimed to draw links between the experience of teachers and the insights offered by a number of philosophers. My process involved speaking to teachers and asking them to describe how they got to know their students, the relationships they built with them, and how they learned about themselves and their students through teaching. We also talked about concepts such as respect, trust, responsibility, and even love.

Then I turned to a number of philosophers and I applied their insights about *being* with another, and what that could mean, to the stories shared by teachers. Ultimately, my hope lay in deepening our understanding of how we interact with students, seeing the power and the possibilities within that, and enlivening our thinking around these ideas. I'd like to share just a couple of the ideas that came out of that research.

## The meaning of success

Teachers meet hundreds of students throughout their professional lives. In their approach to their work, they know they have many responsibilities to the students. The most obvious of these include: helping students to identify learning goals; planning their lessons carefully and teaching specified content and skills. Hand in hand with these responsibilities, teachers must ensure there is ample opportunity for their students to learn, in order that they meet with some degree of success in achieving their goals. But a concept like success can also be understood more intricately.

So in order to dig that bit deeper, I'd like to present one teacher's account of his interactions with one of his students, whom I'll call Rory.

Rory was someone who sat quietly in class, he came across as a bit of a loner. It was very hard to get him motivated and I don't think he had much self-esteem. He was afraid of doing something wrong. He was always coming up to me and saying he'd stuffed it up, he'd got it wrong, and that he'd had enough. So I'd say doing this work is not about right or wrong. I told him it was about developing skills and that was going to take time. Rory didn't finish everything in first semester but he came back in second semester. He was still a loner but he did seem a bit more motivated. I remember one day he was getting very frustrated so I asked him if he'd heard of Igor Sikorsky, and he said that he hadn't. So I told him the story, that he was the one who designed the first successful helicopter, and that he'd worked on it for close to 30 years before he got it right. Rory ended up finishing the course and he managed to get his certificate.

Probably the most obvious measures of Rory's success are tied up in the certificate which he received on the completion of his course. It signifies that he'd showed up to class, that he'd received high enough scores in each module he undertook, and that he'd completed all the prescribed tasks satisfactorily. But the story of Rory hints at another level of success, a degree of personal development, probably not quite so easy to measure. He showed persistence in order to achieve a positive end. He displayed the courage to carry on despite some setbacks along the way. He sought help when he felt disenchanted with the tasks at hand.

This is not to suggest that those character traits were not an integral part of who Rory was prior to him commencing his

studies. But it's reasonable to suggest that these attributes grew in Rory as he progressed through his course. It's also reasonable to suggest that the way in which this teacher chose to be with Rory, and came to know and respond to him, aided in the nurture and growth of these qualities.

Rory's teacher described him as a reserved person, lacking in self-esteem. His *knowing* and *seeing* of Rory led him to offer assurances and support so he was better able to complete set tasks. He encouraged Rory not to be deterred by getting things wrong, suggesting that right and wrong were limited constructs when it came to the longer term aims of learning skills and the acquisition of knowledge. He even added an anecdote about a tenacious Russian inventor to the mix, hoping that this tale may provide some motivation to ensure Rory, just like the inventor, persisted in his endeavours.

Rory's teacher may have chosen to discharge his duties very differently. He may have marked the attendance roll, covered the required content, managed the necessary assessments and left it at that. He may have simply not seen the specifics of Rory, and who he was, as he fulfilled his duties. The fact that Rory was quiet and fearful when having to learn new things would make that course of action seem quite understandable. Of course if all this were the case, Rory may still have met with eventual success in terms of that certificate. But the evident personal development and growth that occurred, helped along by his teacher, is also a component of Rory's success. For all we know, this practice of courage and tenacity and diligence may even contribute longer term to Rory's sense of wellbeing and flourishing. But of course, this small story cannot hope to provide that kind of crystal ball view into his future.

So where are the connections between this teacher's being with his student, and philosophy? To answer that question it is pertinent to first provide some background to one of Aristotle's key theories, namely Virtue Ethics, written well over two thousand years ago (Aristotle 1925, Hughes 2001). Aristotle's theory suggests that virtues, or positive character traits, form part of one's character once they are acquired and learned through habit. You may still feel fear, for example, every time you have to speak in public, but with the ongoing practise of courage, despite the sweating palms and racing heart, the virtue can develop and grow. Aristotle's picture involves a process of development, and the reaching of what he referred to as *Eudaimonia*, which is the idea of happiness, wellbeing and flourishing, arising from the full realisation of your



**Blue leaves by Julie Manassis**

human potential through the practice and expression of excellence in these virtues.

In Rory's case, while in his classroom at least, he was inspired to practise and hone positive traits of character. In his being with Rory, his teacher encouraged him to see the necessity for, and value of, perseverance and resolve. Rory's teacher supported him in practising a level of diligence and commitment towards set tasks. Using Aristotle's reasoning, if students are to flourish and achieve some sense of wellbeing it makes good sense that they are part of a community where virtues such as these are honoured and demonstrated (Alexandra and Miller, 2009).

Of course, Rory's classes are only one of any number of communities to which he belongs, and who is to tell how virtue, or indeed vice, might be practised in other settings. But it's fair to suggest that such considered behaviour on the part of this teacher, while being with his student and his willingness to be truly present to him, might go some way towards Rory's success. This accompanied by his attention to lesson plans, assessment tasks and to all the other doing, that is required of him.

## A sort of love

There is no doubt that in attending to all the required preparation and paperwork, teachers provide tangible evidence that they are meeting their professional responsibilities to their students. But equally, there is little doubt that teachers grow to know their students as individuals, with particular needs and interests, and that inside that knowing and relating, more profound layers of responsibility also come into being.

I'm responsible for creating a situation where people feel comfortable together. Learning involves admitting that you don't know something. It's a humbling thing. Students need to be aware you are interested in helping them to achieve whatever it is they have come to achieve. I don't mean you have to be gushy or become pals, but they have to feel that you care enough about them to do all the preparation that's required. You don't go in there and do nothing. It would be an insult. It's respect and part of that respect is a sort of love you feel for your students.

As this teacher tells it, in deciding to come to class, her students have laid themselves open. They have admitted to a perceived shortcoming in their knowledge which they wish to address. To this teacher's way of thinking, the vulnerability that arises as a result of that admission means that ensuring their emotional safety and a degree of comfort in the classroom is also one of her responsibilities. So, as well as meeting her professional responsibilities she is also motivated by care, respect and the 'sort of love' she feels for them as they work together, in relation, with one another. Granted, many teachers might balk at the use of the word love and that's fair enough. On the face of it, it doesn't sound like a particularly professional word to use. But despite this hesitancy, could love, or at least a sort of love, still be an appropriate term to use?

Turning to *The Symposium* (2001), one of Plato's dialogues, might be helpful at this point. The story revolves around a dinner party where the assembled guests offer their thoughts regarding the nature of love. While each of the guests provide ideas, it is Socrates' comments that are instructive. Socrates makes several claims as to the nature of love, including the suggestion that love is a search for good, that when we love we seek to cultivate what is good (Plato, 1951). So in returning to the teacher's comments, isn't that precisely her intent? She wants her students to feel at ease. She offers them respect, she wants to be of service and to help them achieve whatever it is they wish to achieve. She is motivated

by a desire to cultivate good in their lives, and within that relation, a sort of love is created, much like Plato suggested.

Iris Murdoch (1970, 1992), Irish writer and philosopher, can also add insights here. She claims that love is central to the idea of responding morally to another person. That love is exemplified by opening oneself to a level of concentrated attention, truly seeing another and then responding to them inside a shared *present-ness*. The teacher's comments speak to this level of seeing. She understands that coming to class means revealing a humbling truth: *'I don't know something that I need to know'*. She sees the potential vulnerability that stems from that admission. By Murdoch's account, a sort of love might be the perfect way to describe what can be created inside that attention, when a teacher comes to know, and see her students.

I'd also like to briefly explore what impact this sort of love could have on who teachers and students might be for each other. In order to do so I'd like to return to *The Symposium* and introduce another of Socrates' ideas. He describes his meeting with a wise woman, Diotima, whom he suggests taught him everything there is to know about love. According to Diotima, love is a spirit born of a coupling between resource and poverty.

So taking Diotima's and Socrates' descriptions of love at face value, it seems relatively easy to jump to a conclusion that yes, the sort of love that might come into being between teachers and students is a clear cut representation of exactly that. We have teachers, as resource, meeting students lacking the skills and knowledge they want, and in that relation, inside that coupling, a spirit of love can be created.

But things are not as simple as that. Perhaps a more accurate account of that coupling and the spirit of love it forges, sees teachers and students being a kind of resource to each other at the same time. Yes, there's no doubt that teachers can, and do assist their students. However, teachers also describe being nourished by their job, by their students and by the sense of community and meaning their work affords them.

Teaching gives me a sense of who I am. It gives me a life of value. It gives me friendships with colleagues. Of course it gives me money. It gives me fun because I think teaching has to be fun. It gives me a sense of community. Good teachers bring tolerance and warmth and respect and strength and commitment to the job, because it is a real commitment you make to students. That's good for teachers. Teaching gives me a good life.

This teacher describes the good she finds in her work, dare I say, the sort of love she has for her job. By her own admission it contributes to her sense of identity, to her sense of self-worth and belonging, not to mention her bank balance. She tells us that the love she feels for teaching, the commitment she makes to her students, is ultimately contributing to her own good. It offers her a kind of resource toward her own wellbeing. Perhaps the work of teaching and the nourishment that might provide, can also offer means, or in Diotima's words resource, that ultimately contributes to both teacher's and student's wellbeing.

## Conclusion

There is much to be learned by carefully reflecting upon who we are when we teach, and working towards a deeper understanding of the ways in which teachers come to know, interact with, and relate to their students. By only measuring concepts like responsibility and success in terms of what gets done, we are missing a large chunk of the picture. The contemporary philosopher and thinker Raimond Gaita (1999) contends that when the sole focus in education is on skill acquisition, and no doubt all the resulting reporting that goes with it, we rob our students. I believe we also rob our teachers.

Of course, in order for teachers to bring this level of philosophical thinking to their work, they must have opportunity and time away from the relentless demands of this doing. Having this time means they might be better able to reflect on their practice, the values that they bring to their work, and how all this might contribute to, and enrich the experience of teaching for them and for their students. As Laverty (2006) tells it, encouraging teachers to engage in philosophical thinking is necessary so as to ensure they bring their authentic selves to their work.

It stands to reason that being authentic is very likely to bring anyone, and in this particular case, teachers

working in this sector, much closer to intellectual and personal health, and a sense of wellbeing. When teachers are consciously connected with students in shared focus, and they see the value in that, they can truly affect those students. Just as importantly, they can also affect themselves. Seen and enacted in this way teaching can truly be a transformative endeavour.

## Acknowledgement

Enormous thanks goes to the teachers who generously gave their time, insights and stories when I spoke to them in conducting my research.

## References

- Alexandra, A. and Miller, S. (2009) *Ethics in Practice: Moral Theory and the Professions*, UNSW Press, Sydney.
- Amir, Lydia (2001) Plato's Theory of Love: Rationality as Passion in *Practical Philosophy*, Nov 2001, UK.
- Aristotle (1925) *Nicomachean Ethics*, Sir David Ross (translator) Oxford University Press, London.
- Gaita, Raimond (1999) *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love, Truth and Justice*, Text Publishing, Melbourne.
- Hughes, G.J. (2001) *Aristotle on Ethics*, Routledge, London.
- Laverty, Megan (2006) *Philosophy and Education: Overcoming the Theory-Practice Divide in Paideusis*, Vol 15 No 1 pp 31- 44.
- Murdoch, Iris (1992) *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Penguin, UK.
- Murdoch, Iris (1970) *The Sovereignty of the Good*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.
- Plato (1951) *The Symposium*, Hamilton, W. (translation) Penguin Books, New York.

**Tricia Bowen is a teacher, researcher and writer. She is currently studying in the School of Philosophical and Historical Studies at University of Melbourne, and teaching at Olympic Adult Education.**

# Supporting the needs of young adult refugee students through narrative texts

By David Birch



## Introduction

In the past five years of the Young Migrant Education Program, TasTAFE (Y-MEP), my teaching colleagues have continually sought new and innovative ways of responding to the complex needs of our student group, which is primarily young, adult refugees settling in Hobart. Concerns about a curriculum approach, largely focused around the teaching of ‘functional’ type literacy skills, prompted the Y-MEP program to pilot a project that incorporated the use of narrative texts into daily classroom instruction.

Negotiating the complex web of language-driven systems that define social, political and economic life in Australia, including tertiary-level education, requires a set of sophisticated higher-order language processing skills; skills that challenge teachers to go well beyond the teaching of basic functional literacy (Nakata, 1999). Narrative literature, as a teaching tool, has offered the Y-MEP program a powerful and engaging way of supporting students to, not only gain further control over these complex language and knowledge systems, but further develop a greater understanding of themselves as individuals.

The Y-MEP reading project was funded by Skills Tasmania for one year (2015) which has allowed for the purchase of numerous class sets of books, professional development for the teachers, and for me, as the facilitator of the project, to produce supporting teaching materials.

## Program overview

The Y-MEP program is part of English Language Services at TasTAFE funded by the Department of Education and Training. Our students are all refugee and migrant young adults aged between 17 and 24 years, who have recently arrived in Australia, or who have been studying at local secondary schools or colleges and are in need of further English skills. The students are representative of a range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds, settlement

experiences and pre-migration experiences. Their past schooling experiences are varied. Now in Y-MEP, they have been learning English principally through the Certificate in Spoken and Written English (CSWE) curriculum.

As young adults, our students are aspirational, and it is common for them to enter the program with the hope of one day going on to further study or employment. They hope to realise dreams of self-improvement that would otherwise have been impossible had they remained in their homelands. Indeed, by their very nature, school settings are key to building ‘agency’ within individuals as, perhaps better than anywhere else, they can motivate, and further, provide the necessary tools for young people to take control of their lives (Ferguson, 2015).

Yet supporting our young students to meet these aspirational goals has been problematic. Despite the global endeavours of the program, and the considerable efforts of the teachers, it has been evident that our students are still not always transitioning through to further study and employment as successfully as they might. It has also been evident that they are often struggling, at a social and emotional level, to contend with the uncertainty and tumult associated with their resettlement in Australia.

## Academic challenges

Many of students who enrol in the Y-MEP program have past schooling experiences that are typical for refugees. For example, they have gaps in formal education, disrupted educational pathways, limited literacy and numeracy in a first language, and negative school experiences (Bond, et al., 2007; Fitzpatrick, 2011; MacNevin, 2012; VFST, 2004). Adding to this, we have observed that many Y-MEP students enter the program without the bank of independent learning or critical thinking skills that are perhaps an imperative for ongoing success within the Australian education system. For example, the skills associated with deeper level thinking and reading

comprehension. This may be a result of having grown up within the restricted world of refugee camps, or having only had very basic past schooling experiences.

Although Y-MEP teachers have been aware of these gaps in their education, the extent to which we have been able to respond has been limited, due in part to a curriculum approach that has focused on the CSWE. The CSWE is a 'competency-based' learning curriculum and has an emphasis on functional, instrumental reading skills concomitant with everyday Australian social settings and language situations. To this end, the CSWE has been of great support to the Y-MEP program, however, it was clear to us that an additional and targeted curriculum that focused on higher-order reading and comprehension processes would significantly benefit our students.

The need for further instruction around higher-order reading comprehension was further highlighted after we conducted pre-project assessment on our Y-MEP students using the TORCH (ACER) test for reading comprehension skills. Whilst most of the students were able to respond successfully to surface-level 'locate-information' type questions, in general, the results indicated that most of our students did not have the necessary skills to negotiate higher-level reading comprehension questions, for example those associated with interpreting, inferencing and applying which are the types of skills that are a prerequisite for success at a tertiary-education level.

### **Social and emotional challenges**

Schools are of great value to young refugees in terms of their potential to provide daily rituals, consistency, stability and certainty, peer support, and the provision of pastoral care. All these, collectively, are argued to lead to a sense of safety and a sense of belonging, which in turn support self-confidence and self-expression in young refugees (Bond et al., 2007; Finn, 2010; Hones, 2007; Hughes & Beirens, 2007; MacNevin, 2012; Stewart, 2011; VFST, 2004). This said, upon reflection on how our students were coping with life in Australia, it was clear that the process of school in itself was not enough to address the collective and cumulative social and emotional challenges facing our Y-MEP students.

It is well documented that refugees have life experiences that commonly include exposure to war and violence, long periods of separation from family and friends, witnessing organised violence, loss of security within their own homes, and potentially a perilous flight from

their homeland to a country of relative safety (Fitzpatrick, 2011; MacNevin, 2012; Stewart, 2011). Further challenges are then commonly experienced during their settlement period in Australia. These can include social barriers, stress, racism, exclusion, separation from family and friends, shame and guilt, sleeping issues and unresolved mental health issues (VFST, 2004).

On top of these common refugee related challenges, our Y-MEP students are negotiating a particularly critical time in their lives, when they are actively trying to negotiate a stable sense of self-identity. This challenge is considerable for many of our students in that they may have come from traditional societies where roles and responsibilities are structured and well defined. Adjusting to a new life in a modern and pluralistic Australia can confront young refugees with seemingly impossible contradictions and quandaries, leading to a confusion of identity, and that disorientating feeling of 'being lost'.

The Y-MEP reading project was seen as an additional, safe and achievable way of using the classroom to help students grapple with some of their pre- and post-migration challenges, and moreover, help them confidently and resiliently move forward in their new life in Hobart. This idea is captured through the notion of 'ontological security'. To be ontologically secure means to have 'a security of being ... and a sense that the world is what it appears to be' (Kinvall & Linden, 2010, p. 598), and 'the self-belief to rise to the challenges of changes, conflicts and losses that will inevitably feature as part of human existence' (Thompson & Walsh, 2010, p. 380).

The project wanted to make use of narrative texts, for their concern with social and emotional concepts, to prompt students to consider new ways of seeing and experiencing the world, productive ways of understanding themselves and others, and healthy ways of dealing with challenges. To this end, its purpose was, in part, to embed into the daily teaching of Y-MEP students what is known as 'emotional literacy'. This is defined as:

a values based concept concerned with all aspects of relationships, including (within individuals): personal awareness, understanding, knowledge and skills associated with what we feel and why; a sense of personal effectiveness and an internal locus of control, and; a focus on the positive

Roffey, 2006

Having the words to articulate one's sense of self is perhaps a key way of promoting ontological security.

### Why narrative texts?

The Y-MEP reading project honed in on narrative literature for its great potential in stimulating high-level classroom discussion. Narrative literature is inherently complex and draws on a sophisticated use of language, but has an organisation, and is hence readily accessible for interpretation and discussion. It is therefore of great value in terms of supporting higher-level reading and thinking skills.

Narrative literature can also provide a medium through which students can safely take on board and then consider, alternative ways of seeing, thinking about and responding to the world (Murdoch & Hamston, 1999). Narrative texts represent a rich source of social and emotional identities. They lay bare the life experiences of people, their struggles, their inner turmoils, their attachments to the world, their differences and their indefatigable spirit. Murdoch and Hamston (1999, p. 9) put it like this:

Literature [can be used] to provide students with vicarious life experiences that, in turn, stimulate reflection on their own experience and promote empathy and understanding.

The potential in narrative fiction to stimulate spiritual and emotional growth in readers was recently highlighted in a study published in the journal *Science* (Kidd & Castano, 2013).

The study found that reading fiction can enhance one's 'Theory of Mind'; the ability to understand one's own and other people's mental states, including their thoughts, beliefs, intentions, desires and emotions. The authors observed that:

The worlds of fiction ... pose fewer risks than the real world, and they present opportunities to consider the experiences of others without facing the potentially threatening consequences of that engagement. Readers of literary fiction must draw on more flexible interpretive resources to infer the feelings and thoughts of the characters.

Another inherent value of narrative literature can be found in its rich and complex portrayal of culture. Narrative literature is set within, and even heavily relies upon

Theme: Not having control	Theme: Reclaiming control of your life
Anger	Adjusting to a new school
Anxiety	Courage and determination
Confused identity	Finding a new community
Discrimination	Honoring what is precious
Distrust (in people/in the future)	Hope and patience
Dealing with grief	Life as a journey
Instability	Living in a democracy
Isolation	Making difficult decisions
Lack of routine	New beginnings
Low self-esteem	Remembering important people
Racism	Resilience and perseverance
Separation	Safety and routine
Uncertainty	The rights of children/individuals

**Table 1: Examples of themes that can be discussed through narrative texts**

cultural and social motifs to create meaning. As such, it can offer students the opportunity to explore and interrogate culture, including how individuals relate to it and define themselves through it.

### Choosing good texts

We selected narrative texts for the Y-MEP reading project based on a number of criteria, including: their appropriateness for the different literacy levels represented by our students, their availability, and perhaps most importantly, their potential to challenge our students with concepts that have been recognised as common lived experiences for young refugees. This approach to text selection mirrors a 'biblio-therapeutic' approach to book selection, which encourages reading materials that are matched with the individual needs of people (Dovey, 2015). Significantly, we looked for books that grappled with paired themes such as despair / hope; isolation / finding a new community; instability / life as a journey. These themes broadly fall under the concepts of 'not having control of your life' and 'reclaiming control of your life' (Table 1).

A book used in the project was *The Burnt Stick* by Anthony Hill (1994), set in the far north-west of Western Australia during the period of the White Australia Policy.

It is a story of a mother trying to prevent her son from being forcibly removed from their community due to the light colour of his skin, consistent with the policy of removing mixed descent children to missions. The text deals with themes of loss, powerlessness, uncertainty, and confused identity, but also acting with courage, determination, resilience in the face of loss and honouring what is precious in life.

Another book used in the project was *Joseph had a little overcoat* by Simms Taback (1999). It is a work of children's fiction and is suitable for students with lower literacy levels, but it also provides a set of complex themes that can stimulate lots of class discussion and activity. Set in a rural Polish village, it tells the story of change over time in a man's life and community through the slow untethering and then reinvention of his overcoat. It is richly layered and relies upon readers being able to interpret and infer to appreciate its fuller meanings. The themes in the book pair with attendant themes in the lives of many of our students (Table 2).

### Classroom learning approaches

There is a huge amount of literature on what constitutes a balanced approach to teaching reading comprehension (Cameron, 2009; Pressley, 2006). Balanced comprehension teaching should include instruction associated with basic decoding and fluency; using semantic context cues to help understand word meanings; the teaching of vocabulary, and developing world knowledge around the broader meanings of texts (Pressley, 2006). The Y-MEP reading project did not align with any particular reading program, nor did it aspire to present one. Teachers were encouraged to take ownership of the planning around each book, applying basic and balanced comprehension teaching strategies, yet paying particular focus towards the intended outcomes of the project.

To this end, the project was especially focused on using the books to:

- Consider important concepts associated with the lives of our students, for example, loss, uncertainty, courage and determination, to help them reflect upon their own circumstances, and consider new ways of moving forward in life;
- Develop a bank of 'emotion' vocabulary through which they can more clearly and confidently voice their feelings and aspirations;
- Facilitate the sharing of knowledge, ideas and stories between the students (through discussion, group

Not having control	Taking back control
Loss	Making something out of nothing
Isolation	Community
Fear	Honoring what is precious
	Life as a journey
	Defining what a 'home' is
	Defining your identity
	Recalling positive memories
	Retelling the past (childhood/ growing up/adult life)

**Table 2: Key themes in Joseph had a little overcoat**

activities, role plays) to support positive individual and group identity formation;

- Teach students the strategies associated with higher order comprehension processes, and moreover, when and how to use these strategies (for example, comprehension strategies associated with inferencing, interpreting, synthesising, applying and evaluating information). Pressley (2006) describes this as 'possessing metacognition about strategies'.

In meeting these outcomes, it was seen as important for the students themselves to play a central role in meaning creation around each of the texts. This type of learning can be described as 'inquiry-based learning', where the teacher acts as something of a facilitator and supports knowledge growth through posing questions, problems and scenarios. Murdoch & Hamston write that:

rather than seeing knowledge as something that is taught, the emphasis in inquiry is on knowledge (and understanding) as learned ... students are encouraged to unify, rather than separate knowledge as they move from the acquisition of facts to the development of broader concepts and generalisations  
1999, p. 10

They note that inquiry-based learning allows students to:

incorporate prior knowledge and experience into their learning, see a real purpose for what they are learning, construct their knowledge in different ways, take risks and reflect on their learning  
1999, p. 10



**Y-MEP students**

An inquiry-based approach supports our students to value the life knowledge that they bring to the classroom, reflect upon the significance of it and learn from one another.

The story of Ned Kelly as told by Christine Lindrop (2008), illustrates how an inquiry-based approach can be used to support knowledge growth and higher-order comprehension processes. At the beginning of the story, Ned Kelly is introduced as someone who does not have control of his life. While teaching this book I tried to place students in the middle of the story, and as best as I could, find connections between their lived experiences and the themes in the story.

**Teacher introduction:**

This is a story that many of you will be able to relate to. It is about a minority group who were discriminated against. It is about a young man who sacrificed his life fighting for their rights.

**Possible follow-up questions:**

- Do you know of any minority groups in the world?
- What are some examples of minority groups in the world?
- Do you think minority groups usually have the same power and rights as other bigger groups in a country?
- What else can you tell me about majority groups?
- When people have no power how might it feel?
- How do you get people to hear your voice or respect you when you are part of a minority group?

By introducing the story of Ned Kelly like this, the students were able to immediately and deeply grasp a complex understanding of some of the meanings in the book. The discussions that followed were rich and animated as the students were able to find an internal relationship with the

character of Ned Kelly. Overall the unit of work built around the Ned Kelly text was thoroughly enjoyed by the students, and prompted demand for further teaching through stories.

**Student responses to the project**

At the end of the year, initial pre-project assessment of our students' comprehension skills using the TORCH assessment tool were followed up with post-project assessment. The results showed very encouraging improvements in the reading comprehension skills across the group, particularly at the level of 'inference'. Students who had shown only a very basic ability to negotiate inference-type questions were now able to draw upon a range of strategies and answer questions with confidence. Improved reading outcomes were reported across all CSWE reading levels represented by the students, as indicated through post-project assessment using TORCH.

There was also clear evidence that the project supported improved social and emotional outcomes. Some of the responses to the project from the students included:

Reading stories helps you open your mind to new ideas.

Thinking about characters in stories helps you understand how other people feel.

This story helped us to learn what it means to be part of Australia.

Different skills are required to read stories.

Stories help us to understand and learn about different cultures.

I liked the focus on the strong women in the story – mainly the mother who was courageous and determined.

I learnt not to judge someone by the way they look or by their culture.

Made me think that I should never give up.

Stories help you to think about your dreams and how to achieve them.

I understand what racism and discrimination is now.

The boy in the story reminded me of when I was young. It was good to think about his life and the challenges he faced. I faced challenges like him.

## Conclusion

I have been quizzed about whether or not it is the role of a teacher to work within a social/emotional domain with refugee students in such an active way. My response is that schools have a role in providing refugee students with emotional literacy and are perhaps better placed than any other institution to deliver it. This said, classroom teachers need to be mindful of engendering safe classroom environments, a culture of mutual respect and trust, and a positive and respectful atmosphere. They should apply some basic rules, for example, no put-downs, respectful talking and listening, and the right to pass during conversation. There are a number of terrific texts that can support teachers here, for example *Circle Time for Emotional Literacy* by Sue Roffey (2006).

This project has taught us that the use of narrative texts in the classroom can have powerful and far-reaching outcomes for young refugees settling in Australia. Importantly, these outcomes can include, at both the level of the individual and the class group, spiritual and emotional awareness, growth, and change. Our students have greatly enjoyed learning English through narrative texts. It has also been a process enjoyed by my teaching colleagues. I have witnessed narrative units of work supporting many other learning activities, including drama, debating, numeracy, SOSE, art, journal writing and even poetry. At a personal level, I want to continue to explore strategies to further support what this project has started.

## References

- Lamont, H. (2006) *Teaching and Learning with TORCH*. Victoria: ACER Press
- Bond, L., Giddens, A., Cosentino, A., Cook, M., Hoban, P., Haynes, A. Scaffidi, L., Dimovski, D., Cini, E. & Glover, S. (2007). Changing cultures: enhancing mental health and wellbeing of refugee young people through education and training. *Promotion & Education*, 14, 3, 143-149.
- Cameron, S. (2009). *Teaching Reading Comprehension Strategies: A Practical Classroom Guide*. New Zealand: Pearson.
- Dovey, C. (2015) Can Reading Make You Happier. *The New Yorker*, June 9.
- Ferguson, R. (2015). The Influence of Teaching Beyond Standardized Test Scores: Engagement, Mindsets and Agency. Retrieved 3 September from [www.agi.harvard.edu/projects/TeachingandAgency.pdf](http://www.agi.harvard.edu/projects/TeachingandAgency.pdf)
- Finn, H. B. (2010). Overcoming Barriers: Adult Refugee Trauma Survivors in a Learning Context. *TESOL Quarterly*, 44,3, 586-596.
- Fitzpatrick, F. (2011). A Search for Home: The Role of Art Therapy in Understanding the Experiences of Bosnian Refugees in Western Australia. *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association*, 19, 4, 151-158.
- Hill, A. (1994). *The Burnt Stick*. Melbourne: Puffin
- Hones, D. F. (2007). A Meeting Place for Us. *Multicultural Education*, Summer, 8-15.
- Hughes, N. & Beirens, H. (2007). Enhancing Educational Support: Towards Holistic, Responsive and Strength-based Services for Young Refugees and Asylum-seekers. *Children & Society*, 21, 261-272.
- Kidd & Castano (2013). Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind, *Scienceexpress*, retrieved 4 October from <http://www.sciencemag.org/content/early/recent>
- Kinnvall, C. & Linden, J. (2010). Dialogical Selves between Security and Insecurity: Migration, Multiculturalism, and the Challenge of the Global, *Theory & Psychology*, 20, 5, 595-619.
- Lindrop, C. (2008) *Ned Kelly*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- MacNevin, J. (2012). Learning the Way: Teaching and Learning with and for Youth from Refugee Backgrounds on Prince Edward Island. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 35(3), 48-63.
- Murdoch, K & Hamston, J. (1999). *Knowing me, Knowing you: Exploring identity and difference through an integrated curriculum*. Victoria: Dellasta Publishing.
- Nakata, M. (1999). History, Cultural Diversity & English Language Teaching, In *Double Power: English literacy and Indigenous education*, ed. Wignell, P. Melbourne: Language Australia.
- Pressley, M. (2006). *Reading Instruction That Works: The Case for Balanced Teaching*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Roffey, S. (2006). *Circle Time for Emotional Literacy*. Victoria: SAGE.
- Stewart, J. (2011). *Supporting Refugee Children: Strategies for Teachers* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). Ontario, Canada: University of Toronto Press.

Continued on page 23 ...

# Delivering on policy: strategy influences on teaching, learning and formal assessment

By Lindee Conway



## Introduction

Earlier this year, I was awarded an International Specialised Skills institute (ISS) fellowship, auspiced by Victoria's Higher Education and Skills Group (HESG), that enabled me to travel to New Zealand. My study tour over four weeks, enabled me to visit two universities, five polytechnics and two community programs. I also spoke to people who work in the Foundation Studies sphere, including the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) and the New Zealand Council of Education Research (NZCER).

The time I spent in New Zealand (NZ) afforded me about ten years of learning. It was remarkably enlightening and the welcome and generosity shown to me by Kiwi colleagues was just as remarkable. My study tour preparation and planning involved me cold-calling and inviting myself into busy people's offices and staff rooms. For the record, they mostly laughed at my attempts at Maori pronunciation, a lot.

This article will concentrate mainly on Australia and New Zealand's foundation skills policies and strategies, and, specifically on two aspects of the latter's Implementation Strategy: The Learning Progressions and Starting Points and online-adaptive assessment system.

## Why visit New Zealand?

My interest in how Foundation Skills are delivered in NZ had been brewing for a few years. In 2012, I attended a conference in Hobart, organised by the Australian Council of Adult Literacy (ACAL). Some NZ educators displayed a poster with the following message:

Knowing the learner, Knowing the demands,  
Knowing what to do.

For me, this seemed to encapsulate a holistic approach that valued both the learner and the expertise of the teacher. Further, their workshop that I attended, was about assessment and learning and teaching and seemed to offer

a closer alignment of the three. Back when I was a teacher, I often felt like I was drowning in assessment protocols. If I felt like that, I used to wonder, what was the experience like for the learners?

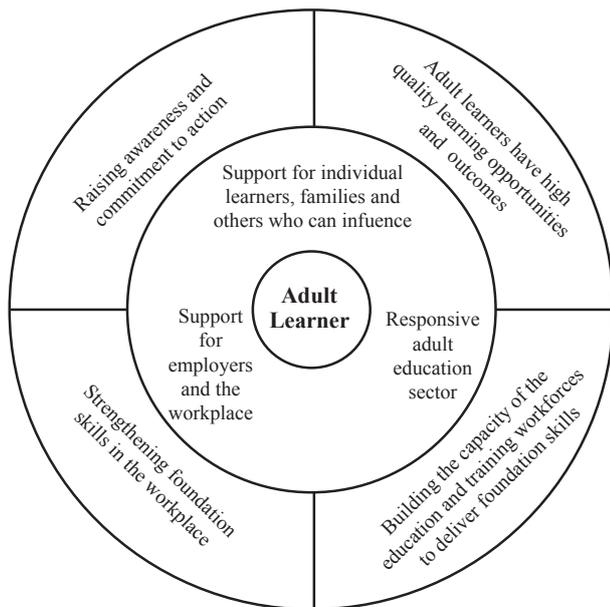
It seemed to me that the Kiwis had put some thought into a better way. I began to read about the research and evidence behind the NZ systematic approach. I found the NZ Strategic responses to be aligned with my interests in finding ways to improve initial assessment practices that place the learner centre stage, or closer to it, anyway.

The main differences I observed, in relation to policy and practice in Adult Education in New Zealand, compared to here was not about population or physical size: it was arithmetic. New Zealand has one government: if their policy-makers decide on a policy and strategy they can devise, implement and tweak within a single structure. As all educators reading this know, we in Australia are blessed with eight governments and a Federation. This has given learners and programs extra opportunities for funding as well as extra layers of protocol and reporting. I'm willing to bet that no Australian politician or policy-maker in any Department of Education sets out to make learning and teaching more complicated, it just seems to occur because of the accretion associated with all the layers.

As an aside to the topic of this article, and in 'late-breaking-news', it is to my mind an absolute blow for common sense that the draft documentation for the Adult Migrant Education and Skills for Education and Employment Programs aligns the pre- and post-assessment to one framework instead of two. This is in accord with the suggestions from the 2015 ACIL-Allen Review (ACIL-Allen, 2015).

## Australia's national strategic approach

Both Australia and New Zealand actively responded to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Adult Learner Skills survey (Windisch, 2015) also



### Components of the NFSS

called the Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). In 2012, the Australian National Foundation Skills Strategy (NFSS) was developed and designed with the adult learner at its centre (Figure1). The NFSS has three overarching principles:

- Collaboration and coordination
- Equitable access to, and increased participation in, learning
- A stronger research base.

These principles are aligned with four national priority areas to surround the adult learner:

- Raising awareness and commitment to action
- Adult learners having high quality learning opportunities and outcomes
- Strengthening foundation skills in the workplace
- Building the capacity of the education and training workforces to deliver Foundation Skills.

Since 2012, projects based on the NFSS have focused on the last priority area. A final report on the NFSS, which focused on the workforce, stated the original strategy's target for increased skills as 'aspirational' (Wignall, 2015). The National Centre for Vocational & Educational Research (NCVER) published a further survey of the LLN workforce (Circelli, 2015). Both of these reports recommend attracting young practitioners into the field, and not surprisingly, cite casualisation of the sector as an ongoing issue.

Over time, all Government's priorities change and implementation of the NFSS offers no exception to this truism. For example, the Workplace English Language and Literacy Program was ended as part of the 2014 Budget measures (Aus-DET, 2014). This decision makes the achievement of 'Strengthening foundation skills in the workplace' problematic. It is also contrary to research findings that:

embedding (LLN) into vocational and workplace training improves the likelihood of retention and success

Alkema, 2015

In another part of their overview of Adult Literacy and Numeracy, Alkema and Rean describe Australia's Policy and Strategy implementation as having 'lost momentum' (Alkema, 2013, p. 15). The NFSS has been subjected to critique in *Beyond Economic Interests – Critical Perspectives on Adult Literacy and Numeracy in a Globalised World* (Yasukawa, ed. 2016). In addition, Louise Wignall offers this commentary in her NFSS Project Report:

Unless there is a commitment... to ensure delivery of foundation skills across personal and community, education and training and workplace and employment contexts, then foundation skills activity risk remaining disparate and will not realise the impact that is required if...targets are to be met

Wignall, 2015, p. 24

### New Zealand's strategic approach

The NZ Tertiary Education strategy and Literacy and Numeracy strategy were designed with a focus on the literacy and numeracy skills necessary for growth of employment opportunities, earning potential, health outcomes, and financial capability. Overcoming the limiting effects of intergenerational disadvantage and impacts on economic growth and social development are at its core. An integrated approach was taken that would see the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC), the tertiary sector, employers and government agencies work together to address this key priority.

As part of my tour, I spent some time with David Do, Literacy and Numeracy adviser for the TEC. I gained insight into how their policy-makers have responded holistically with a suite of strategies and resources outlined here:

**The Learning Progressions** provide levels and descriptors of capability in a range of skills of literacy, numeracy and oracy. They provide a common language to describe competencies and to shape teaching. The Learning Progressions are formatted in a series of books which provide definitions and level guides. They also contain excellent teaching resources, lesson plans and sample assessment responses. The Learning Progressions also include the Starting Points which are relevant for adult ESOL learners (NCLNA, 2016).

**The National Online TEC Assessment Tool** provides an adaptive assessment tool for learners and educators to place skills and map progress. The TEC Assessment Tool is a key diagnostic tool of literacy and numeracy competency for adults in New Zealand (NZ-TEC, 2015).

**The National Centre of Literacy and Numeracy for Adults** at the University of Waikato provides research and analysis for the TEC and professional development customised to educators in the sector.

**Ako Aotearoa, the National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence** at Massey University provides support, and professional development for educators who work with Maori and Pasifika learners. This organisation creates a broad range of resources for all educators, some of which are freely available or else can be bought online.

**Literacy Aotearoa** is a grass roots organisation which offers free literacy and numeracy training to NZ adults.

**Pathways Awarua** is an online and freely available adult learning website which offers formal or informal learning outcomes. This self-directed online system provides modules for learners to complete at their own pace, based on the competencies set out in the Learning Progressions.

## Frameworks for adult learners

The Learning Progressions are the series of documents which:

provide a framework that shows what adult learners know and can do at successive points as they develop their skills

NZ-TEC, 2008

The term Learning Progressions is the same as that used in NZ's primary and secondary system. The skills and progressions described entail listening, speaking, reading

and writing and numeracy. They are much more than descriptors of steps. The hard copy versions are beautifully produced documents containing a wealth of definitions of terms, background information, research findings about all the surrounding macro and micro skills, sample lesson ideas, teaching and learner case studies and learner snap-shots. Imagine if our Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) was expanded and had a volume dedicated to each skill, with extensive references and extra teaching notes.

The Starting Points is a framework within the framework dedicated to describing pre-requisite skills and progressions for adult ESOL learners. With a long history of teaching adult EAL learners, I found this document particularly absorbing with research and ideas for class activities found in one space; I admire the scholarship in evidence in this, and all the frameworks.

Inevitably, there are criticisms of the Learning Progressions. A common one being that they contribute to de-contextualisation and fragment the way educators describe learning acquisition (Alkema, 2015; Hunter 2016). Another criticism of the Learning Progressions (and other aspects of the NZ Literacy and Numeracy Strategy) is that it focuses on pre-employment literacy at the expense of social literacy (Strauss, 2016)

## Assessment Systems

Effective assessment for adult foundation skills learners has long been an interest of mine. I have to say, before I arrived in Kiwi-land, I didn't expect to report that an all online Assessment Tool (hereafter, the TEC Tool) could work so effectively. I am well-accustomed to using pen and paper and scripted assessor question and answer formats. I assumed it was the natural and best way for pre-training assessment (PTA) to be conducted. This entrenched view was held for all PTAs, those for LLN learners, but more particularly for learners seeking help with English as an Additional Language (EAL).

Discussing and reading about the TEC tool online assessment system also increased my interest in online systems used here as a PTA for vocational learners. I now find it illogical that we educators move from one to the other and expect learners to intuitively understand what is better and for which course. It should be stated that at the moment in NZ, the TEC tool is a requirement for literacy and numeracy or vocational learners; it is optional for ESOL learners and those providers who use it can choose between doing an online test,

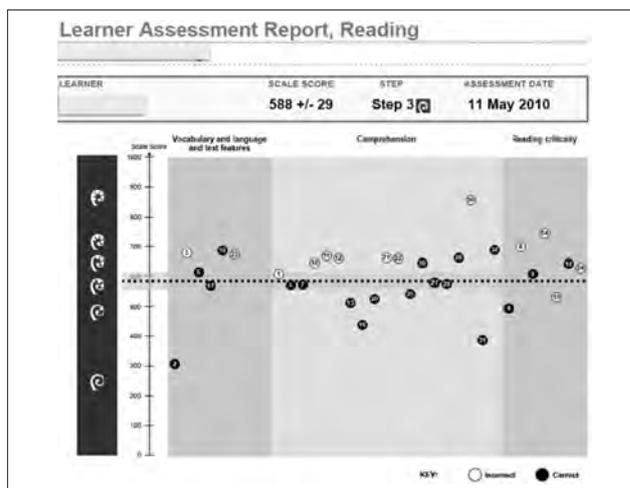
completely, or print off the test and deliver it with pen and paper methods.

My first surprise was to discover that the formal skills assessment, using the TEC Tool is not a PTA done before the class commences, or even usually, within the first week. It is completed a couple of weeks into the learner's program. So, a learner enrolls in her or his chosen course and the teachers work at building a relationship with the learner; after which the assessment activity can be incorporated more organically to the learning program. In the words of one of the Manukau Institute of Technology (MIT) teachers: 'it enables positive discussion with the learner'. On reflection, it makes sense that we ask learners whose attitudes about their abilities with literacy, numeracy or formal learning may be tentative, to immerse themselves first in the process, before responding to formal questions.

A teacher of an ESOL class described how she asks permission to display the class members' responses to the online questions up on the data projector. She then initiates a discussion around why a choice was made and why it was accurate or otherwise. In so doing, the TEC Tool becomes a teaching tool. The emphasis is not on whether responses are right or wrong, but the process and context for making choices. Obviously this kind of activity can only be done sensitively if the group has been together for a few weeks or more. Further evidence of the common sense of the TEC tool being implemented post-enrolment, not pre-enrolment. Many educators commented that having the assessment activity done during course time helped to make the individual learning plan explicit and clear, however, it does take additional time.

Many of the educators commented on the gap existing in adult learners' abilities with procedural and critical literacy. Using the answers given and questions contained in the TEC Tool, assisted in addressing these gaps. The TEC Tool was seen in a positive light by most of the educators I spoke to along the way. This is not to say its introduction into their working lives was not questioned critically. One numeracy educator commented to me:

I felt better, eventually, when I realised the data I got from the TEC tool was probably the same as I would have got across the period of the course, it actually provides that information faster.



Sample TEC Assessment Learner summary

## Conclusion

My ISS institute fellowship study tour was the best professional development I have ever experienced. I hope others will be emboldened to apply for a fellowship or to seek further study opportunities. However, on a smaller scale, my advice is this: create your own Study Program. I wish that I had known decades ago how useful it is to visit another program, meet with colleagues or take time out to tour a few providers and to look at teaching and learning through fresh eyes. The experience of 'crossing the ditch' has provided me with many insights and opportunities to further my thinking and hopefully bring some influence to change practices around assessment.

I would also like to take the opportunity to thank Professor Diana Coben of NCLNA at Waikato University in Hamilton for helping me refine a question I have been trying to articulate for many years, and which may resonate with readers:

What educators should, ideally, be thinking of is: why am I offering this assessment, in this format, to this learner, now? Who is this assessment for?

Coben, unpublished research

## References

- ACIL-Allen. (2015). *AMEP & SEE Programme Alignment Report - final report to the Department of Education & Training*. Canberra: ACIL-Allen Consulting.
- Alkema, A. R. (2015). *Adult Literacy and Numeracy: an Overview of the Evidence*. Tertiary Education Commission, Department of Education New Zealand.

- Wellington: TEC New Zealand. Retrieved March 15th, 2016, from <http://www.tec.govt.nz>
- Circelli, M (2015) *Who is delivering foundation skills? A survey of the LLN and education and training workforces*, NCVET, Australia.
- Hunter, J. (2016). Critical Revisioning-The Construction of Practitioners in Aotearoa New Zealand's Literacy Campaign. In K. B. Yasukawa (Ed.), *Beyond Economic Interests* (Vols. 14 - Series: International Issues in Adult Education, Ed Mayo, Peter, pp. 223-237). Rotterdam: Sense.
- NCLNA. (2016). *National Centre of Literacy & Numeracy for Adults at The University of Waikato*. (T. U. Waikato, Producer) Retrieved April 28, 2016, from National Centre of Literacy & Numeracy for Adults: <http://www.literacyandnumeracyforadults.com/>
- NCLNA. (2016). *The Learning Progressions*. Retrieved September 24th, 2016, from National Centre for Literacy and Numeracy for Adults- University of Waikato: <http://www.literacyandnumeracyforadults.com/resources/354426>
- NZ-TEC. (2008). *Learning Progressions for Adult Literacy and Numeracy: Background Information*. Wellington: The Crown (NZ).
- NZ-TEC. (2008). *Starting Points - Supporting the Learning Progressions for Adult Literacy*. Wellington: The Crown - NZ.
- NZ-TEC. (2012). *Adult Literacy and Numeracy Implementation Strategy*. Tertiary Education Commission. Wellington: NZ-Crown.
- NZ-TEC. (2012). *Adult Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* September 2012. Strategy, Policy, Wellington. Retrieved May 25, 2014, from [www.tec.govt.nz](http://www.tec.govt.nz)
- NZ-TEC. (2015). *Literacy and Numeracy Implementation Strategy 2015-2019*. Wellington: TEC National Office. Retrieved August 3rd, 2016, from <http://www.tec.govt.nz/Tertiary-Sector/Tertiary-Education-Strategy/Literacy-and-Numeracy-Implementation-Strategy/>
- Skills - Adult Literacy Policy. (2012). *Australian Core Skills Framework* (ACSF) Revised (2nd ed.). Canberra: Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research & Tertiary Education.
- Strauss, P. (2016). 'I can see the rabbit!' Perceptions of the Imagined Identity of Foundation Skills Studies and its Link to Academic Success. In *Beyond Economic Interests* (Vols. 18- Series International Issues in Adult Education - Ed Mayo, P, pp. 105-118). Rotterdam: Sense.
- Wignall, L. (2015). Research to identity and qualify professional practice in foundation skills. Department of Education & Training. Canberra: Australia DET.
- Windisch, H. (2015). *Adults with low literacy and numeracy skills* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). Paris: OECD Publish. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5jrxnjdd3r5k-en>.
- Yasukawa, K. B. (Ed.). (2016). *Beyond Economic Interests - Critical Perspectives on Adult Literacy and Numeracy in a Globalised World*. Sydney: Sense.

### Recommended further reading

- Coombe, C., Davidson, P., O'Sullivan, B., and Stoyhoff, S. (2012). *The Cambridge Guide to Second Language Assessment*. New York: CUP.
- Walker, J. R. (2014). *The Media Construction of an adult literacy agenda in Canada. Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 12 (1), 143-163. doi:10.1080/14767724.213.859002
- Smythe, S. (2015). *Ten Years of Adult Literacy Policy and Practice in Canada: Literacy Tensions and Workarounds*. Language & Literacy: A Canadian Educational E-journal, 17(2), 4-21.

**Lindee Conway is Head of the Foundation Studies Department in the School of Foundation and Preparation at Melbourne Polytechnic. She completed a Masters in VET Education at Victoria University and is currently studying at University of Melbourne.**

# Practical Matters

## Vox Pops: activities that work

Continuing our series of short classroom activities, this time with a focus on health and language development.

### Up and moving in English Class

Classes that are timetabled over five hours can be very taxing on both the students and the teacher. Varying the pace and content of these sessions is necessary to keep learners engaged. Brief routines of physical exercise give students a chance to take a break and reboot for the next learning activity. Students learn about the benefits of exercise for their health and wellbeing: to improve posture, mood, flexibility, as well as cardiovascular fitness and strength. At the same time, language learning is enhanced with all the opportunities for new vocabulary and discussion.

This routine was developed with the help of the students and a volunteer who practises yoga and Feldenkrais. It has become a regular part of each lesson and the students really enjoy the benefits.

#### How does it work?

To begin, all the class stands up and, led by the teacher, go through a set of exercises. These are done twice in the session. Each exercise has a title which stimulates engagement and language understanding. The routine is written up and displayed on the whiteboard. Regularity and repetition reinforce language development through both visual and verbal cues.

Here are some of the exercises that you can add to with your own routines. We advise that you use common sense health and safety measures to ensure everyone is working at the right capacity. Ask if there are any health concerns or injuries before the start.

These exercises aim to warm up and loosen the joints from head to toe, with gentle, stretching movements and remember, no straining:

#### Loosen the joints

Head: nod up and down; shake; turn from side to side (use prompts: yes, no, maybe).

Shoulders: pedal or swimming strokes (use descriptors: forwards, backwards, breaststroke, side stroke).



Students enjoying their exercise routine

Arms, elbows, wrists, hands and fingers move in a range of ways (use terms: flex, bend, rotate, extend and shake).

Pelvis, hips, legs, knees, ankles and feet move in gentle flow (use terms: balance, bend, flex and rotate).

These exercise routines are examples that mimic familiar actions or everyday objects:

#### Washing machine

Rotate your upper body with arms outstretched; using actions of filling the machine with water and increasing speed through cycle. Slow down and end with floppy movements until coming to a stop.

#### Picking grapes

Reach your arms up high to pick grapes overhead and put in an imaginary basket. Keep the movements flowing and smooth.

#### Full moon

Stretch up with your arms shaped like a full moon and gently stretch right to left. Focus on keeping the round shape.

#### Holding the ball

Stretch your arms out in front as if holding a giant ball and gently stretch right to left.

#### Autumn leaves

Bend over as you scoop up the leaves then stretch out your arms to throw them away.

Once students are familiar with these, a stronger routine could be developed to extend the students focus and strength.

### **Squats**

Keep your feet flat on the floor, then slowly bend your knees keeping your back straight. Use your thighs to push upright again.

### **Finally**

Shake it all out! This usually involves some laughter and release of energy so that the students know that it is time to sit down again and start the class.

Students are very positive about these routines. They look forward to the break from mental work and appreciate the need to keep active and physical. They are aware of the dangers of sitting for extended periods. Some have taken the exercises home and work on them regularly. Many parts of the routine have come from the students, building on movements they know from practising Tai chi and from childhood.

Jane and her classroom volunteer Karen, are passionate about maintaining good health for themselves and their students.

## **Talk about healthy settlement!**

Oftentimes, simple yet authentic activities get overlooked in this age of bedazzlement with digital technologies. A tried and true series of training sessions that focus on women's health and its accompanying language and literacy elements is a winner every time. The sessions involve vocabulary development about the body; comprehension activities with health information; recount writing and positive engagement with health professionals. All with the ultimate aim of increasing the health and English language skills of the group of newly arrived female students.

This series of lessons utilises the resources of the local community health centre. Firstly, a nurse from the centre comes to the class to give an informal talk about women's health and the health centre services, especially for families from culturally and linguistically diverse communities. This session integrates listening, speaking and hands-on experience with silicon body parts, medical diagrams and equipment associated with the regular check-ups that women in Australia are likely to encounter. This is all within the familiar environment of the students' regular classroom.



**Students with the visiting nurse**

Following the class session with the health centre nurse, the students visit the health centre together. In this session students' familiarity with the health centre is increased further through supportive group activities and engagement with health centre staff. Students report being surprised at how much more friendly and accessible the health professionals in Australia are compared to what they had expected or experienced in other countries.

The students consolidate and reflect on their learning from these sessions back in class. This is done through reading and writing activities based on the texts gathered from the health centre visits such as brochures, posters, photographs and recounts. It's a dynamic and practical approach to developing a range of literacies for students in an early phase of settlement in Australia.

Joy works with newly arrived migrants and finds these kinds of hands-on experiences in the community are always engaging and successful.

## **Weaving a web**

This activity is one you can rely on as a warm up or to consolidate and practice vocabulary and language concepts. You will need materials such as a ball of wool or rope.

Firstly, ask the class to stand in a circle. Then suggest, or ask them for a topic such as favourite pastimes, people's names, food (vegetables/fruit/favourite foods) or grammar (parts of speech) or simply work with some question and answer routines.

It is good to model the activity with a volunteer by starting with a question like 'What did you do this morning?' Throw the ball of wool to a person, while keeping hold of the end. The person responds 'This morning I ...'

Then they pass or throw the ball to another person and ask ‘What did you do?’ or ask a different question. Students can repeat what the previous person said, ask the same question or come up with a new question. The idea is to move the ball in random order to form a web. Do not let go of your part of the wool.

Other questions and answers could be:

- Good morning my name is ... What’s your name?
- Hello everyone my family name is ...What is your family name?
- I come from...Where do you come from?

Maria likes to keep her students active and engaged through a range of creative activities.

### **A time to chat**

A successful activity with low level learners is to start or end the session with a relaxed, casual conversation. Ensure that the learners are seated facing each other and choose a topic suitable to engage the cohort. Something as simple as ‘What are you cooking for dinner tonight?’ or ‘What did you cook for dinner last night?’ (if the focus is past tense).

It is good to begin by either modelling the language or using a learner with higher language skills to start. The seating is important and a good tip is to seat the most garrulous learners next to the teacher and those more hesitant opposite. The teacher can encourage speakers through eye contact and positive body language.

This type of casual conversation, which allows the learners to share some personal but non-intrusive information on familiar, comfortable topics, not only increases their language skills and confidence but also creates rapport in the classroom. For low level learners, using the same topic over a number of sessions is often very effective as the learners develop the vocabulary and confidence to participate more fully.

Dianne believes it is important to reduce the teacher talk and redirect the conversation back to the learners. She is fortunate to have volunteers in the class and provides them with written and verbal information tips related to managing the conversation group.

### **The StoryCorps app**

In 2003, Dave Isay the founder of *StoryCorps* opened the first story booth in Grand Central Station, New York. The aim was to capture people’s stories and it has since

generated a gigantic US oral history. Isay believed in the transformative power of people sharing their stories and really listening to one another, especially to the elderly. Last year, Isay used a million-dollar TED prize to create the *StoryCorps* app.

This app is freely available and is a great resource because it’s very structured with a lot of scaffolding. The app can provide students with interview questions and transitional structures, leaving time for teachers to focus on developing digital literacy skills; locating and understanding menu options; decoding icons; creating online accounts; alongside oral communication skills.

There are two parts to it. The first is you actually construct the interview by typing questions into the phone or selecting from a list of pre-populated questions related to different themes such as work, family, relationships. The app is good for literacy students because they have the option of creating their own questions, using the *StoryCorps* questions, or the teacher might supply very basic alternatives.

The interviewer then selects the interview length from another set of options, enters the interviewer and interviewee’s names and finally starts the interview. A script appears for the interviewer to read prompting them to introduce the interview in the same way a radio presenter might start an interview. For example: the prompt might be something along the lines of ‘Hi, I’m Anna and today I’m sitting here with Liz in Melbourne, Australia’. Proceeding with the interview requires the interviewer to swipe the screen to generate the follow-up questions that the interviewer has set beforehand. Finally, the interview is saved and stored on the interviewer’s mobile device as a wav file. They may choose to share it on the *StoryCorps* database.

The app is supported by a website featuring hundreds of audio and animated stories. These can be listened to or watched with subtitles either as a precursor or as a follow-up activity to students making their own interviews. There’s an amazing story about a husband who helps his wife develop numeracy skills in order to get a promotion at work (<https://storycorps.org/listen/larry-kushner-and-eileen-kushner-160916/>). *StoryCorps* is a simple tool for structuring conversations and stories about everyday people’s triumphs and struggles. <https://storycorps.org/listen/>

Anna is excited by the challenges of incorporating new apps and digital literacy into her teaching.

# Introducing Graham

*By Jan Hagston*

**Launched at the Victorian State Library in July, Graham is an interactive sculpture that is part of a TAC campaign and roadshow visiting regional galleries across Victoria. Jan Hagston has been involved in developing learning activities to accompany Graham and raise awareness of road safety.**

Let me introduce you to Graham, the only person designed to survive trauma on our roads. Graham is the Transport Accident Commission's (TAC) latest road safety initiative, highlighting how susceptible the human body is to the forces involved in road crashes. As part of the TAC's Towards Zero vision, it draws attention to the physical changes we need in order to protect ourselves from our own mistakes on the road.

Thanks to evolution we can survive hitting a tree while running at full pace but we haven't evolved to withstand vehicle crashes where the speeds are faster, the forces greater and the damage to our body far more extreme. To survive such a crash undamaged, we would need to look something like Graham which is a sobering thought.

Melbourne artist, Patricia Piccinini created this interactive sculpture to demonstrate human beings' vulnerability. In her research to create Graham, Piccinini consulted with Royal Melbourne Hospital trauma surgeon, Christian Kenfield and Monash University Accident Research Centre crash investigator, David Logan. They discussed factors that included the forces involved in a road crash, how they impact on the human body and what bodily features might be present in humans if they had to evolve to withstand the forces involved in crashes.

Some of Graham's features include:

- A skull much like a helmet to protect his brain. In addition, there is more cerebrospinal fluid around the brain and ligaments to brace the brain when a collision occurs.
- A flat, fat face to absorb the impact of hitting something at high speed. Our faces are a mix of bone, muscle and cartilage. Hitting the steering wheel or dashboard can cause serious damage to bones, the nose and to the parts behind the cheekbone.
- No neck as necks are one of the body parts likely to be damaged in a car crash and cause paraplegia or quadriplegia.



## Looking inside Graham

- Skin, ribcage, knees and legs have also 'evolved' to help him survive on our roads.

When you meet Graham you can explore his unique features by means of immersive augmented reality technology allowing you to look beneath Graham's skin. If you can't meet Graham in person, you can meet him online ([www.meetgraham.com.au](http://www.meetgraham.com.au)) and get under his skin virtually.

Graham has a presence that is so lifelike. His skin, hair and eyes look real but so different, thankfully, from us. I'd been involved in writing a number of teaching ideas based around Graham, focussing on our vulnerability on the roads as pedestrians, cyclists, passengers and drivers. The activities are primarily for primary and secondary school teachers and are aligned to the Victorian Curriculum and can be accessed at [meetgraham.com.au/education](http://meetgraham.com.au/education).

But Graham isn't just for children. Firstly, he is a work of art. The artist, Patricia Piccinini, is known for her creations of hybrid creatures that push the boundaries of what is human and what is animal. They are often both tender and grotesque, and always confronting. At [www.meetgraham.com.au](http://www.meetgraham.com.au) you can hear her thoughts about Graham and

why he looks like he does. You can find out more about Piccinini and her work at [patriciapiccinini.net/](http://patriciapiccinini.net/).

Graham is a great stimulus for thinking about and discussing human vulnerability, an issue which is relevant to all road users. It allows us to have discussions about how to stay safe on the roads. Graham offers numerous opportunities for adult literacy and numeracy learners to explore a range of topical issues around road safety.

### **A few teaching and learning ideas:**

Discuss and research the ideas behind the development of Graham, such as human vulnerability and why people make mistakes on the road. Some good websites for research are Towards Zero: <https://www.towardszero.vic.gov.au> and Safe System: [tac.vic.gov.au/road-safety/the-safe-system/safe-system-learning-module/safe-system](http://tac.vic.gov.au/road-safety/the-safe-system/safe-system-learning-module/safe-system).

Explore how Graham communicates messages about road safety to the general public.

Who is the audience? What is your response to Graham? How do you think different age groups would react?

Compare other TAC campaigns ([tac.vic.gov.au/road-safety/tac-campaigns](http://tac.vic.gov.au/road-safety/tac-campaigns)) with the approach taken with Graham. How are they similar or different? What aspects of

the Graham campaign could be more effective than previous campaigns?

Plan an interview with Graham to write up as a news report. What questions might you ask him? What headline would you use?

Write a story for young children about how to cross the road or walk to school safely. Think about who your characters will be, where the story will be set, what happens to the characters.

Design a poster that reinforces messages of road safety for different age groups. What messages would you include for elderly people, youth or for young children?

Adult and young students alike can gain insights and better understandings of the body's vulnerability on the roads through interacting with Graham. It is worth trying to see Graham in person and you can find his location at [meetgraham.com.au/visit-graham](http://meetgraham.com.au/visit-graham).

**Jan Hagston is an experienced educator specialising in adult and youth education and literacy. She has worked with secondary schools, TAFE institutes, adult community education providers, universities, and in workplace education programs. Her experience covers curriculum and materials development, professional development, and research.**

### **... continued from page 13**

Taback, S. (1999). *Joseph Had a Little Overcoat*. United States: Viking Press.

Thompson, N. & Walsh, M. (2010). The Existential Basis of Trauma. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 24, 4, 377-389.

Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc. (2004). *School's in for Refugees: Whole-School Guide to Refugee*

*Readiness*. Brunswick, Victoria: Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc.

**David Birch is a teacher with the Young Migrant English Program at TasTAFE in Hobart. He has previously worked in a range of school settings in the Northern Territory and the Torres Strait, where he has focused on the teaching of language and literacy.**

# Numeracy Matters

## How do your students measure up?

By Pam Mahlis

**Measurement is an extremely important aspect of everyday numeracy. It is a practical activity used in daily life, whether in cooking or shopping, or more complex tasks of building, renovating, landscaping and gardening.**

Throughout my years of teaching the topic of measurement, I have used an array of activities that aim to engage students in experiences that include real world applications, problem solving and hands-on activities, all of which involve using a variety of measurement tools. These activities aim to ensure that all students are able to distinguish between linear, square and cubic measurements. These are all essential in forming the basis of their understanding of measurement. Moreover, once these concepts are developed, the students will be able to revisit their prior knowledge and apply it to harder problem solving activities.

### Estimation

Estimation is a vital aspect in a student's holistic approach to measurement. Being able to estimate distance, length, width and time is something that students will rely on throughout their further studies in mathematics, as well as in everyday life.

For estimation, I first use basic activities in order to familiarise students with the concept. These activities include: measuring objects in the classroom with the use of the student's hand span. Students measure the distance from the tip of their thumb to the tip of their little finger when their hand is outstretched to determine their hand span in centimetres. By doing this, the students are able to use this knowledge in taking an educated guess as to how long or wide an object might be.

This is a useful activity, as it primarily gets the students used to estimating with a ruler, but in this case their hand span. They have to add to the amount their hand span was originally in order to estimate the object's length and width more accurately.

Students calculate their stride length by walking for twenty steps and then dividing their total distance by the number of steps (twenty) to determine their stride in centimetres. Students estimate the length and the width of the classroom

and various spaces using their stride as the measure.

### Activities

These activities engage students in using their measurement skills and applying their knowledge in different contexts.

### Body Ratios

In this activity, students make their own fascinating discoveries and become aware of the concepts of ratio and proportion, as they relate to measuring features of their own body. Students measure different parts of their body including: arm span, wrist to elbow, foot length, circumference of the neck, circumference of the waist, and so forth. Students then have the task of finding pairs of body measurements that are equal, half, double or one and a half times the length of the other measurements.

### Area of Hand

Another simple activity is to measure the area of the hand. This can be done by tracing the outline of the hand on a piece of paper and then using *unifix* blocks to fill the inside of the shape of the hand. Once it is completely covered, the students then count how many blocks there are to determine the area. Students can also use one-centimetre grid paper to achieve the same result.

I have found that throughout these activities, students were intrigued as to discover how different measurements of their body corresponded with each other. Not only did this give them insight as to how intelligently built the human body is, but rather how all types of measurement correspond in some shape or form. Additionally, students were amazed as to how many *unifix* blocks it took to fill up their hand, in order to determine the area.

### Cooking

Students discussed and selected foods to cook and then used their measurement skills to work out the amount of





**Students with the cake they made**

liquids and solids required in the cooking process. Not only did students have to measure liquids and solids, but they had to measure how long they required different cooking appliances to cook their food.

Students had to use a microwave and manually set the required time. This was a first for some students as they don't own or use a microwave. By participating in this activity, students had to apply their skills, not only in measuring different liquids and solids, but calculating the time it took for them to carry out certain steps in the process of making their dish. Setting cooking time and allowing enough time to enjoy the final product, as well as the time required to clean up, were all noted. This activity also gave students the opportunity to make a cake from scratch which many had not done before. It was a new experience to prepare and organise what they needed, thus helping them become more independent.

#### **How many times can a lolly snake be stretched before it breaks?**

The lolly snake activity is a fun way to incorporate measurement in the classroom. I have adapted this activity into an investigation project where students are given the task to come up with a project using a packet of lolly snakes to explore their measurement and estimation skills.

The first stage of the project involves brainstorming to determine what type of questions students will be trying

to answer and how they will go about devising their questions. Then the students think about how they will use the snakes to demonstrate measurement, estimation, and how data will be obtained and how they will then use the data to draw graphs and to analyse their results.

The students are given a packet of lolly snakes and asked to estimate the perimeter and area of the packet. Then they are given a checklist of things to estimate: weight of the whole packet; weight of one snake; the total number of snakes in the packet; how many different coloured snakes in the packet; and the length of one snake. Once all estimations are made, students then accurately measure each item to compare their results.

Another task involves students initially measuring the length of one snake. They stretch the snake and measure it again. Students then stretch the snake a second, third or fourth time, recording the measurements at each stage until the snake breaks. This usually evokes much laughter and adds an element of competition, as each student tries to outdo another.

As an extension to this activity, students were given a python snake lolly each. They were very keen to carry out the above procedure to see how far it could be stretched in comparison to the lolly snake. Students were then placed into groups and each group did part of the report. Students decided to write this up as a scientific report with an aim, method, results and a conclusion. Students tabulated the class results, and then produced the appropriate graphs.

These activities have assisted my students to develop skills in estimating, measuring and making informed and reasonable decisions when working with measurement in familiar and everyday situations. The elements of fun, not to mention food, add to the value of the learning experiences.

**Pam Mahlis teaches CGEA numeracy at Olympic Adult Education (OAE).**

# Technology Matters

## Accessible language learning with computers

By Josie Rose

After a break of over fifteen years, Josie Rose found herself teaching again at Gippsland Employment Skills Training (GEST) in Moe, in the La Trobe Valley. She brought to her teaching all her experiences working in management in ACE, supporting Learn Locals to introduce technology enabled learning.



The Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) class I work with is comprised of migrants and refugees from South Sudan, Afghanistan and China. It is part of a project funded by the Department of Education and meets a real need in the area. GEST is responding to a specific need articulated by the Sudanese community leaders, that there were not enough accessible language learning opportunities for Sudanese in the Moe/Morwell area, particularly once they have completed their 510 hours at the AMEP.

I team teach with a project worker who is employed by GEST to liaise with the CALD community in the La Trobe area. She also provides settlement support for new arrivals in the region. She is not a teacher, but having said that, she knows the learners extremely well and during the coffee breaks she provides a lot of social and personal support to the students. She is my 'filter' as she has a better understanding of their overall language levels and helps me to keep things simple.

Another member of the class is a young eighteen-year-old Afghani asylum seeker who is still trying to find out his status. He did not go to school in the refugee camp in Pakistan where he grew up, but is currently doing his VCE at the local high school. He is a volunteer in my programs, working with the older women to help them navigate the computers.

### Meeting community needs

Most of the group are unemployed or underemployed and find it difficult to attend regularly scheduled classes, especially the women. The program has been set up to train participants in the use of specific language learning programs that they can access independently at a time that suits them. In terms of language level, they vary from beginner to intermediate. Many have had no previous education, and those who had some education have suffered disruption to schooling as a result of war and displacement.

The GEST funding submission stated that, anecdotally 98% of African males in the area remain unemployed, and although some of the women are finding success working in Aged Care, language remains a significant barrier to most for accredited study and employment. Difficulties for ACE providers in servicing this group relate largely to class sizes and the inability to engage with the community due to lack of funding for a community development worker. Newcombe and Achren (2010, p.2) point out that CALD communities are often unaware of the role of ACE organisations within communities and that engagement strategies are required.

It is against this backdrop that I developed a short twenty-hour pre-accredited module to teach learners how to use five specifically designed multimedia language learning programs from Protea Textware. The programs are specifically designed by Australian language learning specialists and focus on teaching the alphabet, and the most important sight words, to help learners express opinions in English, as well as programs that aid spelling, vocabulary acquisition and pronunciation.

The benefit of these programs is that learners, once they have mastered access to the programs, can practise the same word, skill or grammar point over and over again until they are completely familiar with it. They plug in with a headset and can listen and repeat the word or phrase until they get it right, without having to expose their vulnerabilities to the rest of the class. It is not surprising that different learners and different cultures take to this with varied and often great enthusiasm. This is due to the fact that the material is adult appropriate and relevant to their daily lives.

The Chinese students, for example, particularly like the vocabulary exercises, and all the learners to date have appreciated an opportunity to learn how to express opinions in English. This is something that has a significant cultural overlay in many countries and they are keen to practice this

in relative anonymity and privacy. Added to which they are getting scaffolded instruction in their own time with a lot of user choice built into the system.

The course is offered over ten weeks with the learners getting instruction in a new program every second week. They are encouraged to come in during the week to consolidate their skills and there is always someone from the staff there to help them. I am developing a learner guide for each of the programs with simple, well-illustrated instructions on how to access the programs. I go through it with them in class and they have a copy to guide them when they come in for independent learning. The workbook also has a copy of their individual learning plan and a digital literacy skills checklist. I am also encouraging them to write a sentence in a journal to record/evaluate their progress. We choose a topic from the software that is relevant to what they are learning in their conversation class.

We developed an ongoing conversation class to run alongside this program, entitled English in the Community. Together with the community support worker we developed a course that covers all aspects of being a productive and involved member of the local community. They learn the language of conversation, make visits to service providers and other things they need to know as the need arises. The computer programs provide further vocabulary and grammar to support these very valuable structured conversational interactions that they all appreciate. The support worker also brings in various guest speakers, and they go on outings in the community.

### Structuring the learning

In a typical CALL class, I would introduce the program by making reference to why and how it can help them learn English, I show them the program in an overview where they watch, and then we work together to drill down into a series of exercises. I do these with them, where they can follow on their own computer but we do them together to discuss answers and strategies. After that I give them some time to retrace these steps. Once they are familiar with the workings of the program, they are encouraged to explore.

At the end of the two-hour session we have some time to reflect on our experience and evaluate if, and how, it can be of use to them in learning English. The learners have a detailed instruction booklet to support their independent exploration and ensure that they will be

able to navigate back to the program when they come back for independent study.

If we look at any one session in my CALL course through the lens of Vella's (2002) four A's as cited in Clemans (forthcoming, p.4 - 6) there is a balance between teaching and learning tasks as outlined below. Very much anchored in the constructivist learning paradigm, learners are encouraged to constantly assess how the activities are helping them gain understanding of the complexities of in this case, English language:

**Anchor:** the teacher explains the program, its advantages, and which listening, speaking, reading or writing skills it will develop and around which themes. The teacher ensures that the learners are able to discuss the program and its intent by looking at specific words/concepts (such as Issues in English which looks at issues like the environment, euthanasia, smoking, public transport) and relating these back to their experiences and also in terms of what their individual learning goals are.

**Add:** in this part of the session the teacher would demonstrate how to access the program and demonstrate how they will access a topic chosen by the class. The learners can watch and/or follow on their screen. We discuss the process and support the learners as they go. We do a few of each of the drill down exercises together to ensure they know how to drag and drop, for example, or type in the answers as required, and hear the feedback. They are shown how to record their own responses, and listen to those.

**Apply:** the learners choose a topic and work through at their own pace, noting progress on a record sheet and asking for help as required. Learners are also provided with an instruction booklet with language and visual aids to support their independent exploration of the topic. At the end of the class, they discuss their experience and if they feel confident in using the program for self-access. They are encouraged to record a very short reflection in their journal.

**Away:** the learners access the program before or after class time and discuss progress with their teacher. The teacher reviews progress in the next session before we move on to the next program.

### Key drivers to learning

In this program there are three major drivers at play. The learners want to learn English, they need to learn to use

computers effectively and efficiently, and they are keen to communicate with each other to build relationships in the community and practice particular communication skills.

In terms of mastering the computer and the software, there are aspects of the mechanistic tradition at work. In terms of their interpersonal relationships and attitudes to learning, given that the bulk of the learners are South Sudanese, there will be some ethnographic influences and in terms of my and the community support worker's overall approach, definitely a strong influence of the humanistic tradition. In fact, our approach to the structure and delivery of the session is very much influenced by a humanistic tradition.

As stated earlier, the bulk of my learners are South Sudanese. Given their recent political turmoil and the circumstances in which these learners ended up in Gippsland, as a teacher I am aware of the potential impact of social, cultural, historical and political shaping of meaning and memory, as cited in Waterhouse (1999, p.19) for these learners; there are elements of the ethnographic tradition that will impact on their learning styles and expected experiences.

Freebody and Luke's notion of multi-literacies also cited in Waterhouse (1999, p20) is a particularly useful construct in analysing the choices at play in the design and delivery of the sessions. In order to teach one literacy, we introduce another. For example, the use of multimedia to construct new forms of meaning for each individual learner. In fact, the development of digital literacy skills is happening by stealth, as the learner becomes more and more familiar and skilled with the software and requires less help and support to master the program. Digital literacy terminology is taught and explained, as and when, the learner is ready to learn, 'just-in-time' and 'just-for-me'.

Any teacher in community education would agree that the relationship with the learner is paramount, particularly when working with technology. Developing a supportive 'can do' attitude where it is not the learners fault if things go wrong is crucial in helping them build confidence in their ability to navigate the computer and have a productive learning experience. Our sessions are focused on confidence building, improving social participation and developing specific employability skills and knowledge. In aligning with the terms of the intent of pre-accredited funding, we carefully design the activities,

learning and skill building that needs to happen before the learner is ready to access further education or even look for employment.

## Conclusion

Reflecting on my recent return to the classroom, doing again what I started over fifteen years ago, I find Palmer's (2007) premise very useful:

...good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher.

For me this is something of a paradox, as I always feel that when I teach, I take on a different persona or identity. I am much more extroverted as a teacher than I would be in any other situation. And, by all accounts I am a good teacher – I have an award to prove it! My learners come back every time and we enjoy learning together. I have an enthusiasm and passion not only for my subjects (EAL and eLearning) but also for teaching and learning. I am what I teach, and I enjoy it immensely. I always come home with a smile on my face. I think that this is what Palmer (2007) might mean when he refers to the inner resources that good teaching always requires.

In thinking about integrity, I can say that I care about my learners. I always prepare well, and try to make the lessons as accessible and interesting as possible. I am able to change the lesson plan if a question or topic comes up that is more pertinent to their current situation. In the field of computer assisted language learning, it is important to break things up into small manageable steps and make decisions about what computer concepts and activities to explicitly teach at any one time. Flexibility is a very important aspect and having a plan B and C in a computer class is imperative.

I like to think I can connect my students to the pleasure of learning and achieving through a well thought through series of learning activities that help build their skills. I have also learned that unless I know who my learners are and what they are bringing to the classroom on a daily basis, my teaching will have much less impact.

Finally, I would say that when I am teaching at my best I feel like a guide. This means that we are on a journey of discovery together and that I have the knowledge and skills and, in this case, the technological fluency to make

their experience a trouble free and enjoyable one, so much so that they are happy to come back for another leg of our learning journey.

## References

- Adult Community and Further Education Board. (2015). *Outcome Based Framework for Government Subsidised Pre-accredited Training*. Retrieved from <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/training/providers/learnlocal/Pages/memo.aspx>
- Bull, G. and Anstey, M. (2007). *What's so different about multiliteracies?* Curriculum and Leadership Journal. An electronic journal for leaders in education. Retrieved from [http://www.curriculum.edu.au/leader/whats\\_so\\_different\\_about\\_multiliteracies,18881.html?issueID=10766](http://www.curriculum.edu.au/leader/whats_so_different_about_multiliteracies,18881.html?issueID=10766).
- Clemans, A. (forthcoming) Dialogue Education: from teaching to learning. Monash University.
- Kaufmann, H. and Westwood, V. (Producers). (2011). *Issues in English*. CD ROM. Protea Textware Pty Ltd. Hurstbridge, Victoria.
- Newcombe, J. & Achren, L. (2010). *CALD Settlement and ACE possibilities: Gippsland Region*. AMES.
- Palmer, P.J. (2007. First published 1998). *The courage to teach: exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. Jossey Bass, San Francisco.
- Waterhouse, P. (1999). Extract from *Good Beginnings: A search for authenticity in adult education practice and identity*. Ch 2. Theoretical perspectives informing the study. Melbourne.

**Josie Rose has been active over many years in establishing and developing eLearning for Learn Locals in Gippsland. She is currently working as a teacher at GEST and business development manager at the Gippsland East Learn Local Alliance.**

# Open forum

In the final of this series of reflections on the past decade in LLN, Linno Rhodes takes a look at the changes in the CGEA and the LLN policy environment.

## Smoke and mirrors: Where are the adult literacy students now?

By Linno Rhodes



When I began working as an adult literacy teacher about thirteen years ago, there seemed to be many options for adult literacy students. There were small Registered Training Organisations (RTO) such as Neighbourhood Learning Centres, and larger institutes such as the Centre for Adult Education (CAE) or TAFE institutes that offered a range of part- or full-time courses. At that time, the fees were affordable for most students. Now, it seems like the options are fewer, even though the data shows that enrolments in the CGEA have not decreased significantly over the last five years.

In the book, *Reading the Fine Print, A History of the Victorian Adult Literacy and Basic Education Council 1978 – 2008*, written by Beverley Campbell and commissioned by VALBEC, the early chapters track the emergence of adult literacy as a sector:

In Victoria this grass-roots movement began out of a perceived need to offer literacy education to those needing it in post-school education

Campbell, 2009, p24

Literacy, once seen only in the binary of illiterate/literate was redefined through the work of many theorists like Brian Street (1995), to being understood as a *social practice*, and that there are many *literacies*. Those working in adult literacy education understood that the syllabus necessarily included a critical reading of the world and literacy courses were seen as part of an ‘enrichment program’.

Teachers understood that teaching in the literacy classroom was not merely teaching reading, writing and numeracy skills, but it was also:

Injecting the human element into learning aimed to redress negative school experiences and to steer the

prevailing ethos of learning away from remediation towards nurturing and personal development

Campbell, 2009, p39

Adult literacy lessons took place in libraries and spare rooms of TAFE institutes and schools. This was community ownership of adult literacy education which was viewed as being part of the wave of social transformation that included Women’s Liberation, Gay Rights and Land Rights. Adult literacy education was politicised and those who worked in the area identified as being both agents for social change and educators.

Adult literacy provision has shifted into the Vocational Education and Training (VET) space and now sits at the forefront of economic reform. It has been influenced by government(s) policy, particularly around the National Training Reform of the Hawke Keating era and the introduction of contestability to the sector. The commitment by the current state government to Language Literacy and Numeracy (LLN) through the VET Funding Review (2015) and a review of the way funds are distributed, might go some way to address critical issues around the way LLN is situated in the VET space.

### Everything old is new again

I came into teaching adult literacy on the tail end of the first iteration of the Certificates in General Education for Adults (CGEA) and remember well the controversy around the second iteration and the shift away from General Curriculum Options (GCO)s. Teachers enjoyed the autonomy of being able to design and develop electives for themselves, much like a pre-accredited course is now. Then there was the shift to electives selected from a list of suggested Accredited Units of Competency. At that point, the A-frame was in the development stage. Employability Skills were known as Generic Skills or Mayer competencies and

GCOs were designed with the development of these in mind.

The shift from Generic skills to Employability skills is an important marker in mapping the recent history of the CGEA. 'Generic' speaks of a transferability easily imagined from one environment to another, whereas 'Employability' is limited by its very name. There have been times in my teaching practice where students have looked at me quizzically when referring to employability skills. There are many reasons why some adult literacy and numeracy students do not identify with this seemingly mandatory pathway to employment.

Originally, the CGEA was designed as a framework to enable a pedagogical means of addressing adult learners' literacy and numeracy learning needs. In its nascent years, it served to address literacy needs in a more holistic fashion, where:

Student progress was often measured informally by judgements about increased self-confidence or changes in demeanor

Campbell, 2009, p115

In the decade that followed its inception, the National Training Reform Agenda shifted the CGEA from a framework to a series of competency-based accredited courses and eventually positioned adult literacy provision in the VET space.

The current discourse reflects the way adult literacy provision is funded, seen and spoken about. It is no longer referred to as a 'movement' which almost infers revolution, but as a sector that is no longer radical, now de-politicised. It is reliant on government funding to survive, and as such, dependent on compliance to funding agreements, and responsive to audits and performance reviews.

LLN in VET has been contentious for many years. The arguments are still going on and have as much currency today as they did two and three decades ago. Language, literacy and numeracy are not skills you acquire like a trade; competency-based training may not be the most suitable method of assessing LLN, and teachers are not trainers.

Jean Searle proposed in her Fine Print article, *Policy and Passion in ALBE: a discourse about Discourses* (2002) that:

If adult literacy was to be taken seriously as a new and vital field, ALBE had to reposition itself. While some commentators argue that the field was co-opted and colonised by the VET discourse (Lee and Wickert, 1995), others suggest that as funding was aligned with vocational and employment outcomes it appeared that there was no option but to reposition adult literacy within the broader VET Discourse. This move was not without its problems. VET was being driven by industry, not by the education sectors.

## Global perspectives

The impact of globalisation and the National Training Reform Agenda saw people who had previously worked in factories for ten, twenty, thirty or more years, out of work. Often with low level literacy and numeracy skills, they could not see their way back into the workforce. Every job seemed to have a minimum certificate level qualification attached to it. Initially, they were sent to TAFE or ACE organisations for re-skilling and training with computers.

Job referral agencies had their funding tied to outcomes. Their clients had to be 'in training' if they were not employable because of LLN issues. That impacted further, often on women, when childcare subsidies were only made available for learners studying Certificate II or above. Students were more often being referred to RTOs to address their literacy issues but private RTOs started getting more and more referrals. As a result, the TAFEs hurt, but so did the smaller community based RTOs. Students seemed to be disappearing from ACE.

The introduction of contestability to the sector in 2012 saw a surge of private RTO providers entering the LLN space. Within a couple of years, there was a decrease in subsidies offered for Foundation skill courses (which include all language and literacy focused courses), and an overly-heavy compliance burden. This has resulted in a hugely negative impact on the sector. Many smaller community-based organisations have given up their RTO status or have closed their doors completely.

It is often difficult to maintain healthy numbers in an adult learning classroom. The ALBE student is often dealing with a multitude of issues and complexities. It is almost necessary for organisations to be politically committed to providing ALBE classes and fund them by ensuring healthy enrolments in other classes.

A decline in RTOs offering the CGEA would surely correspond to a decline in student numbers, but the data doesn't reflect that. The enrolments in CGEA have not significantly declined since 2012. A quick look on the website [www.training.gov](http://www.training.gov) reveals many providers have the CGEA on their scope but subsequent checking of their home websites showed not many of these providers actually offered the CGEA in their course brochures. Contestability has allowed private RTOs to offer literacy courses cheaper or free and sometimes with incentives, and they often hatch deals with employment agencies.

Adult literacy classes are currently offered by various funding models:

- Pre-accredited funding which allows Learn Local organisations to run classes that demonstrate a pathway to either further education or employment/vocational outcomes. Many organisations run literacy classes through this model, with the advantage of not having to follow a competency-based model which is assessment and compliant heavy.
- The Commonwealth funded SEE program is underpinned by a focus on employability skills and outcomes. Eligible learners can enrol for 800 fully funded hours but they must be able to meet strict attendance requirements and show consistent improvement in their LLN skills so that they may be 'more employable'.
- Victorian Training Guarantee (VTG) is state funding which subsidises eligible learners but is not available to anyone who has completed a diploma level course and limits learners to commencing two courses per year.

## Conclusion

I had intended to write about the disappearance of the adult literacy student, but of course, the students haven't disappeared. I realise now that it is a case of 'smoke and mirrors'. I expected to find a decrease in enrolments but that also isn't the case. ALBE students are accessing ALBE classes where they are offered *and* pre-accredited literacy classes, *and* attending the SEE program – although many Job Actives require ongoing reminders to refer adult literacy and numeracy students.

The compliant-heavy requirements of delivering foundation level courses in the VET sector is an impediment to delivering holistic literacy and numeracy education. The positioning of LLN in VET and the focus on employment outcomes has resulted in a shift away from the politicisation of literacy education for adults.

*Skills First*, the Victorian Government's most recent approach to funding the VET sector in response to the VET Funding Review, gives me hope that we may see an increase in the Adult Community Education (ACE) sector's capability to deliver quality LLN courses to those people who are marginalised and who have multiple and complex needs. The provision of \$20 million funding through Re-Connect which, from 2017 will support organisations' capacity to provide 'wrap-around' services. This will further enable those vulnerable learners to engage in meaningful vocational education through literacy, health and accommodation support. We are yet to see the detail of how the extra \$20 million will be implemented, but organisations are looking forward to being able to use it to support their learners.

We may have a long way to go before we have come full circle, but a decade ago this is what the ACFE annual report (2004-2005) noted about the ACE sector and adult literacy provision:

Adult education organisations provide a unique, community based context for learning, a genuine focus on the individual needs of learners and the flexibility to meet their learning requirements. For this reason, the ACE sector is particularly suited to meeting the needs of adult learners of all ages who wish to undertake personal enrichment programs or gain qualifications and employment.

There is hope that this belief in the value and place of adult education and LLN provision in community settings will continue to be acknowledged and funded, perhaps one day unconditionally and with greater certainty.

## References

- Campbell, B. (2009). *Reading the Fine Print, A History of the Victorian Adult Literacy and Basic Education Council 1978 - 2008*. VALBEC, Preston, Australia.
- Searle, J. (2002) Policy and Passion in ALBE: a discourse about Discourses. *Fine Print* Vol 25:2: p6.
- Street, B. (1995). *Social literacies: Critical approaches to literacy in development, ethnography, and education*. London: Longman
- ACFE Annual Report (2004-2005) <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/department/200405acfeannualreport.pdf>

## 2016 Learn Local Awards

*By Linno Rhodes*

The annual Learn Local awards celebrate the depth and spread of adult learning achievements across the state.

Establishing the Learn Local sector in 2011 ranks as one of the most successful initiatives of the Victorian State Government. The Adult Community Education and Neighbourhood house sectors have worked closely together for decades, establishing strong relationships to deliver diverse programs that meet learners' and community needs.

The Learn Local awards night showcases achievements across the State by recognising exemplary learners, practitioners, programs and courses, managers, organisations and industry partnerships in the community. The night is a lavish affair and the entertainment, catering and table arrangements are provided by different Learn Local providers and social enterprises. This year we were entertained by Freestyle Academy, we ate an amazing two course meal catered by The Mission Caters and Williamstown Community and Education Centre provided innovative edible table arrangements.

The camaraderie and goodwill in the room was heart-warming, as cheers and applause exploded from the tables each time a nominee was called to the stage. The Minister for Training and Skills, Hon Steve Herbert commented in his address:

All Victorians, no matter their background, should be able to access training to get the skills they need for the jobs they want. Learn Locals are often the first step on someone's pathway to employment.

The Chair of the ACFE board, Sue Christophers, and other dignitaries were present showing that ACFE and the Learn Local sector are held in high regard by the wider education, industry and community sectors.

Meg Cotter and myself, in our roles as VALBEC co-presidents, were delighted to attend the Learn Local awards night and to hear the stories of so many learners, practitioners and workers in the sector. We share with everyone in congratulating all the nominees and ultimate winners:

### 2016 Learn Local Awards Winners

#### **Rowena Allen Award - Recognising Pre-accredited Learner Excellence**

Matthew Agostinelli – Diamond Valley Learning Centre

#### **Outstanding Practitioner**

Marj Sjostrom – Keysborough Learning Centre

#### **Excellence in Creating Local Solutions**

BA@Wyndham – Wyndham Community and Education Centre

#### **Outstanding Pathways Program**

Speaking Out – Port Melbourne Neighbourhood Centre

#### **AMES Australia Diversity Innovation**

CALD Education & Employment Pathways – Ballarat Neighbourhood Centre

#### **Learn Local Legends**

ACFE North Western Metropolitan Regional Council – Djerriwarrh Community and Education Services

ACFE Loddon Mallee Regional Council – Macedon Ranges Further Education

ACFE Southern Metropolitan Regional Council – Glen Eira Adult Learning Centre

ACFE Gippsland Regional Council – Gippsland Employment Skills Training

ACFE Eastern Metropolitan Regional Council – Vermont South Community House

ACFE Hume Regional Council – Myrtleford Neighbourhood Centre

ACFE Grampians Regional Council – Nhill Learning Centre

ACFE Barwon South Western Regional Council – Bellarine Living & Learning Centre

**Linno Rhodes works at Olympic Adult Education in Heidelberg West. She is VALBEC co-president and a member of the Fine Print editorial committee.**

# Foreign Correspondence

## The joy of the difficult

By *Kate Nonesuch*

Working in Adult Literacy is Kate Nonesuch's blog in which she shares insights about learning and teaching based on her experiences in Adult Basic Education (ABE) over several decades. She has kindly agreed to republishing this post (October, 2015) that concluded a series on 'trigger warnings'.



I remember early on in my teaching ABE career, I ran into a colleague who wanted to have stories and articles with happy endings so we didn't add to the misery of the students' lives. I couldn't then tell her why that seemed so wrong-headed to me. She didn't want anyone upset and wanted the class to be comfortable for everyone – and I suspect most of all for her.

Evelyn Battell, comment on an earlier post in this series

Many ABE instructors will give the same reasons as Evelyn's colleague for not wanting to use 'difficult' material with their students: it will upset the students, and it will make the teacher uncomfortable. The reasons come as two faces of a weighted coin: What is most comfortable for the teacher often turns out to be what is 'best for the students'.

In this series on trigger warnings, I have given some examples of what I have learned about shaping my teaching around material that reflects the lives, struggles, hopes, and current conditions of literacy for ABE and General Education Development (GED) students.

Most of us exercise a large degree of control over the content that we bring to our students. Teaching the skills of reading and writing can be done using any subject, in fact, studies of best practices usually recommend that we pick something relevant to the students when we begin to work on those skills. Usually the difficulty we face is a lack of resources, when neither the students nor the program have funds to buy texts. Often we resort to things we can download from the net, or photocopy.

So given that you can choose anything, why should you choose material that you think will need a trigger warning?

**Because it's respectful.** However hard people's lives are, you don't make them easier by ignoring them or leaving their stories out. Reading material that never reflects students' own situations perpetrates a lie. It is damaging, not healing. It tells the student that s/he is wrong, and doesn't fit within the human context.

**Because it teaches the true value and purpose of reading and writing.** People read because they find something useful in the text: information they can use in their daily lives; a reflection of themselves that inspires or consoles. People write because they have something to say. Reading offers us the powerful experience of seeing our lives reflected back to us. However, if students always read stories about people they don't recognise and don't care about, reading itself seems boring and pointless.

**Because it connects us.** I want to help students understand that they are not alone in their experiences, by showing their experiences represented in text. When you see you are not alone, you can begin to understand that it is not your fault.

One year my class read a little novel about a woman whose husband beat her. I was concentrating on vocabulary and plot, and making sure I had up-to-date referrals to local groups that could help women in the same situation. Into my busyness a South Asian woman threw a stunning statement that shows how reading connects. "I didn't know it happened to white women," she said.

### Leaning In

The process of dealing with tough stuff is wonderful and powerful. Teachers and students both 'lean in'. Everyone is aware that something important is up for discussion, that language is being scrutinised, that boundaries are being negotiated. The awareness electrifies the atmosphere.

That's where the power of the written word is revealed to students who have already decided that reading and writing are not relevant to their lives, that school is just a hoop you have to jump through to get to the real prize: a better job. That's where the power of language allows them to see themselves and their lives in a new and interesting way. That's where the transformation happens.

And in that electrified atmosphere, dealing with real issues and important themes, the skills we are charged with teaching come into sharp focus: finding the words to express yourself and getting immediate feedback as others respond to your words; paying attention to the ideas of others. What are they saying? Do they have reason on their side? How are they manipulating my thinking? Why is it important to me and to others not like me? What is the main idea? Are the supporting details relevant? Is it fact or opinion? How does it evoke emotions? What difference does it make in my world and in the larger world?

## **Not Safe, But Safer**

And all of this in a space that the teacher has managed to make, not absolutely safe, but safer, by showing respect for students' lives, by acknowledging that painful experiences interfere with present life and learning, and by providing students with access to stories and articles about people who share their experiences, their problems, their joys; in short, by including them and their lives in the description of the human condition.

Previously, in this series on trigger warnings:

- Trigger Warnings
- Trigger Warnings from Students
- Trigger Warnings: An Outlier
- Trigger Warning Tells a Lie

**Kate Nonesuch continues to generously share her knowledge and useful teaching strategies and resources on her blog at <https://katenonesuch.com/blog/>**

# Provider Profile

## Always there – filling the gaps

*An interview with the Southern Grampians Adult Education and Community College leadership team by Lynne Matheson*

**Regional Victoria is dotted with adult learning centres that cater for the diverse learning needs of people living in country towns and surrounding communities. This Provider Profile highlights the resilience and strength of some of the people who make it all happen.**

David and Sue, two students from Southern Grampian Adult Education and Community College (SGAE) were part of the *A Fuller Sense of Self* publication and the follow up *Five Years On* digital stories, recently launched on the VALBEC website. Their stories reflected how their learning experiences at SGAE and the staff there had helped them build their confidence and connect with their community. The welcoming atmosphere and friendly classes at SGAE had encouraged them to learn.

Curious to find out more about SGAE, I drove up to Hamilton and spent several hours in conversation with Karen Winfield, the newly appointed Executive Officer (EO); Julie Neeson, past EO and now part-time Business Development officer; and Denise Phyland, Disability and Compliance officer. They were keen to talk about their students and the people who make SGAE the successful learning centre it is today. What follows is a combination of their insights and observations.

### Background to SGAE

Denise Phyland was the first staff member appointed to SGAE when it was set up in 1998 by South Western TAFE. It operated as a shopfront with one training room for introductory computer classes. In early 2000, Julie Neeson was finally lured away from Casterton where she had been manager of the Casterton Neighbourhood Centre for ten years. She brought with her a 'can do' attitude, and working alongside Denise, they did everything to generate ideas and make funds stretch to achieve what they wanted for their clients. Karen Winfield came on board as a trainer in mid-2000. She was soon balancing the books as well as working on projects. Denise, Julie and Karen have worked closely together ever since, bringing enormous amounts of energy, innovation and commitment to make the organisation thrive.



**Denise Hyland, Julie Neeson and Karen Winfield**

From small beginnings, SGAE has evolved into the new premises in Thompson Street, now locating it in the heart of Hamilton. Serving the community and anticipating future needs have been the driving forces behind the success and growth of SGAE. Over time the organisation has endured changes in management and funding. It has developed as a robust and resilient organisation, in no small part due to the dedication of the leadership team and the commitment of teachers and support workers. SGAE is a Registered Training Organisation (RTO), Learn Local organisation and senior secondary education provider. The addition of Community College to the name of the organization was to acknowledge the expansion of the youth education program.

The move to the new premises in October 2015 was the culmination of years of saving and planning. Converting the building from an accountancy practice into an adult education centre required much vision and creativity. The result is a building that serves staff and students well, with fit for purpose spaces and a welcoming atmosphere. Additional funds were needed to install an automatic front door and disability access to classrooms and toilets. There are plans to further modify more offices into learning spaces next year.

### **What adult literacy and numeracy programs do you offer?**

Where once a team of accountants interacted with files, facts and figures, now around thirty teachers plan, design and conduct classes. Enrolments are about 152 students engaged in foundation learning across a range of curriculum: Course in Initial Adult Literacy and Numeracy (CIALN), Certificates in General Education for Adults (CGEA), Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), as well as Certificates in Work Education and Vocational Pathways Foundation Skills Training for Work.

Foundation courses are a large part of SGAE programing as it suits the really low levels and can be repeated to accommodate students who return year after year. The teachers are creative in the ways they change themes each semester, while providing reinforcement of the same skills. A focus on practical skills and integrated projects has resulted in activities such as a fundraiser Mad Hatters' tea party. A trip to Bendigo and a day camp in the bush provided great learning experiences for students, some of whom had never travelled away from home independently.

Students have learned about important skills in nutrition and hygiene through planning and conducting these activities. Staff are encouraged to 'think outside the square' and consider how their students can best learn. They are given some autonomy but need to work within budget and curriculum constraints.

### **How have the education needs of your community changed over time?**

There has always been a need in the community for the foundation skills programs and students come to see SGAE as more than just a learning environment. The social elements are incredibly valued and important for a student's sense of self. David and Sue are just two examples of the changes in self-esteem and confidence directly attributable to attending classes at SGAE.

Julie observed that some students may seem to be cosseted in Hamilton and so it has been great to challenge them and take them out of their comfort zones. One wheelchair-bound client who is non-verbal has been running the footy tipping and he also plays competition bocce. He has grown in confidence to the point of independently planning a trip to the football at the MCG.



**Happy students in the new premises**

For many SGAE clients, work is not an option, which makes having a purpose in attending classes so important. Developing life skills and establishing social networks are critical. With a mix of ages and abilities in classes, the students feel connected and are willing to come back and keep learning.

In the early years of the CGEA youth program, there were issues with some students who displayed challenging behaviours and destructive attitudes that impacted on the teachers and other students. This has improved and the current VCAL students are supportive of each other and appreciate the adult learning environment. They are able to tap into support networks and services, while planning their pathways to TAFE courses or employment.

The VCAL program has grown and become more successful with a breakfast program and additional support through the local schools and industry groups. For some of the students, it is a challenge to break away from three generations of welfare dependency. It can be too easy to not come to class, so that changing attitudes and behaviours is an ongoing challenge. The students are engaged particularly through finding work placements that provide a pathway for them to succeed, whether in finding future work or further education.

### **What are some of the strengths of SGAE?**

The main strengths of SGAE are that the programs all cater to the students' needs and focus on skill sets relevant to the kinds of work they can engage in once they move on. The range of foundation skills can build pathways to TAFE, however, for many it is more about rebuilding confidence that may have been affected by previous negative experiences of education.



### **VCAL students**

Denise commented that often, when she is out shopping and she meets students, they greet her like an old friend. She laughed when describing how one student commented on the new premises saying, “It’s like a posh university”.

All the teaching staff at SGAE are fully qualified and most have a literacy and numeracy background. Many of the staff have been with the organisation for long periods of time which provides stability and continuity.

In the early days of providing an introductory CGEA course, one of the teachers, Sue Munro, was frustrated by the lack of available resources to suit adult interests, while being at the appropriate reading level. This led to the development of a suite of resources, *DIY Housing* being the first that won an award in 2006. The work that Sue began has continued with *DIY Gardening* and *DIY Cooking*, now sold across Australia.

The Southern Grampians Press has grown with the development of new resources to support students working with the CGEA and aimed at industries such as hairdressing, hospitality and aged care. Subsequent changes to the CGEA necessitated a project to add a supplement that maps everything to the ACSF, making the resources still applicable to the CGEA curriculum.

### **What have been some of the organisation's achievements in ACFE funded or industry partnership projects?**

The ACFE funded Employment Skills Community Learning Partnership program in 2009 was an initiative that has led to greater links with local industry and the expansion of SGAE operations. The project report documented partnerships and collaborations which have

given SGAE a central voice in shaping future directions in adult education for the region.

Karen is pleased that SGAE continues to offer the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment as there is a real need to provide this training in the region. She has pursued further qualifications to bring new approaches to the course for local people keen to become trainers. An added bonus to the course is the opportunity to observe and deliver training to the students at SGAE. They can learn in a class setting under supervision and gain a real understanding of the needs of the students, as well as the theory. Karen is working with local industry to explore the potential to modify a specific skill set for supervisors to better respond to industry needs.

In 2016, SGAE expanded its Work Education delivery to Bendigo through a partnership with Radius, a community organisation providing support services and supported employment services for people with a disability. This is an exciting development and has the potential for other locations and organisations to work with SGAE in areas such as Retail and Hospitality.

### **What do you see as the challenges of working in the adult and community education sector into the future?**

Staff are required to take on multiple roles in the organisation and with an ageing workforce there are concerns about sustainability. Compliance is a necessary and time consuming activity. The experience can be frustrating when often the auditors come with no understanding of the programs or the students. These are common issues across the sector and SGAE maintains a strong strategic planning framework to ensure success.

As we came to the end of the interview, all three women expressed concerns that there will always be challenges around uncertain funding and ever expanding workloads. Karen had the final word, in saying:

The dedicated and flexible staff are the major strength of SGAE. Everyone contributes and is able to take on extra roles to ensure the students learn and keep coming back.

My thanks to Karen, Denise and Julie for their time in sharing some of the stories that demonstrate how vital adult education is to regional communities.

# What's out there?

## The Namaste series compiled by Keiron Galloway

*Reviewed by Rhonda Pelletier*

In 2014, the Tasmanian Council for Adult Literacy (TCAL) published the *Namaste* series of stories. Keiron Galloway worked with the students to write the stories, provided photographs and illustrations and worked on the book design with Steve Cooke.

The six stories tell of people:

... seeking asylum in Australia, fleeing their homeland under dangerous circumstances, living in limbo, and leaving everything behind for a new life in Tasmania. The stories are deeply moving, and deal with the themes of family, community, freedom and independence. All the protagonists emphasise education and life skills as necessary for creating fulfilling and autonomous lives for themselves and their families, and write about the great sacrifices they made in achieving these skills.

Great resources are often the result of a team effort. When I first heard of these stories I was thrilled. Frequently resources for adult second language learners are either based on overseas textbooks and contexts, or, for low level learners, drawn from resources for children and young people.

The *Namaste* series is one resource among others that help to address this need. The series' authors have recorded some of the decisions they had to make and the experiences they had to go through to reach Australia. Not all of these are positive and it is clear that they have lost much to gain much. So, in reading the stories there is, on offer, a philosophical discussion about the terrible 'trade off' refugees and migrants must make.

But this level of discussion may not be available to a teacher or a class given the impact it may have on revisiting traumatic times or the way English language skills may inhibit expression and the ability to work through elements of the stories. This level of discussion may evolve from instead working on the concept of storytelling: what makes a good story, how do you structure a story, and are there cultural differences they



have noticed between storytelling in their first countries and in Australia.

- Reading this collection, I was considering these questions as possible ways of engaging with each story:
- How could I use these stories with students who are still learning to read English?

- Could the stories be read aloud to students to assist with listening skills?
- How could they best be used to develop pronunciation?
- Could I explore the structure of narrative across cultures with the students?
- What criteria do different cultures use to decide which pieces of information are critical to a story, and how is the story sequence selected?

### Suggested activities

Class activities could be designed around recalling from aural memory, requesting repetition or clarification of concepts and themes. Another activity could be to ask students to provide an oral summary of what you have just read aloud and discuss. Alternatively, ask questions about the content or the way in which it has been described.

Vocabulary activities could focus on specific terms or expressions and their origin or cultural significance. I suppose there is an ‘of course’ there but it is a great listening skill to be able to pull out one word from an aural flow and ask about it.

Narrative threads might be explored by asking what do you think happens next? Students can work in small groups to compare what they have heard and decide what they think will happen next. This would draw on the students’ own experiences and may raise some contentious points for them. Rapport and practise would make this stage of the work manageable for them.

What happens to the story if you put the end first? In all of these stories the end is actually a beginning. In the story, *The Future* the narrators have reached a point in their lives where there are clear achievements

(beyond reaching Australia) that suggest further goals and developments.

What is the difference between the first person and third person stories? How does that effect the experience of the reader and your impression of the protagonist? Is it possible to ‘re-write’ the stories so classes of mixed ability could share the same moment as a group?

The stories have a strong beginning, middle, and end structure. They are journeys with the classic journey features of struggles, achievements, setbacks and resolution. This could be useful in exploring structure, but also enables some activities for students to listen to segments of the story and label which part of the story it comes from.

Of course, such good stories would also invite the chance for students to write their own versions. Students with ACSF2/3 skills could be introduced to the stories with assistance with the vocabulary and what would be a long text for them. Students with ACSF3/4 skills would be in a position to approach the issues, comments and opinions in the stories, should that be appropriate for the class.

The *Namaste* Series is published by TCAL, with the support of 26TEN. The stories can be downloaded as PDF and two ebook formats – EPUB and MOBI from <http://tcal.org.au/resources/books/> where there are two other story groups to draw from.

**Rhonda Pelletier is an English and EAL teacher who has taught in a number of contexts: overseas, secondary, TAFE and the workplace. Her various roles have included course design, facilitation, coordination and management.**