

# Learning journeys and life stories from students in Melbourne

Students throughout Melbourne write about their life and learning pathways, where they've come from and where they wish to go, while teachers respond by reflecting on their teaching practices.



## When does school finish?

*by Peter Stevens*

As a mature-age 30-something, starting school in pre-apprenticeship cabinet making was not a difficult decision. However, it did take some considerable thought.

Being a little older, surrounded by 'youngens' can be somewhat intimidating. Being a minority is always intimidating I guess. As much as we like to think we don't care what others think, part of schooling is the interaction with fellow students, the sense of belonging and camaraderie.

I am happy to report that our imaginings are always worse than reality. I find whether young or a little older, we're

passages that will tell us this same thing, though essentially they are: compete with yourself, do the best you can because it shows through.

I am in a privileged position right now to be able to take on full-time study, having worked full-time and studied part-time in the past with the mortgage hanging over my head. I really hope I can impress on those of you that are beginning your lives in this industry— please take advantage of being able to give your best effort now while you can before life gets too complicated to study and concentrate.

So when does school finish? Never. You'll always be learning, don't be put off, enjoy it, because it means you're living. It's your movie, complete it any way you want, just make sure it's a good movie and it's yours.

students is to get involved and ask lots of questions, so I am learning along with them. I believe that like me, Peter Stevens was inspired to write about his learning journey by those talented teachers in the Furniture Studies department at NMIT.

**Gilda Alavuk is a literacy and numeracy teacher in Furniture Studies at NMIT.**

## **My story**

*by Kyra*

I come to CAE in 2002. I was bored in my life. My English is not the best. I have got a goal in my life to write a book about being disabled.

I use a computer to write with. I love the computer. I love to write letters to my friend and write short stories about my life.

**Kyra is a CGEA student at CAE.**

## **What English classes mean to me**

*by Ourania Panagiotidis*

I have been attending English language classes at AGWS

I have had inspiring teachers in the years of my learning and they have become my friends and mentors. I feel very lucky to have such positive people guiding me in my life. This is one of the aspects of English classes that mean so much to me.

I am now so proud that I can talk to my grandchildren and I can express my thoughts to them in English such that they understand what I am trying to say. I feel so much closer to them—that's what makes me happiest of all!

**Ourania Panagiotidis is currently completing English classes at Australian Greek Welfare Society.**

## **My learning journey**

*by Geoff*

After a work accident, I sat at home and wondered what the future had in store for me. I had no experience of the educated world, no office knowledge. I was scared of computers and had nothing to offer any future employer.

Then it hit me, 'Why not go back to school and show everyone that I could have something to offer?' So I enrolled at Glenroy Neighbourhood Learning Centre and hey presto, success immediately. I was no longer scared of computers,

Australia was a big, wide, open space. Each house had its own garden, which looked nice and beautiful.

I enjoy the freedom here. We are free to talk about anything and tell people our ideas. You do not get into trouble from the government. Australian people are very kind and friendly. There are a lot of different foods and the water is nice and clean too, so I thoroughly enjoy myself here. Living in Australia isn't difficult. Even before I arrived here whilst living in Vietnam I hoped I could come to live here.

**Binh Giang is a student at North Melbourne Language and Learning.**

## **My journey into education**

*by Shane Kirby*

My journey back into education began when I first stepped onto the Victoria University campus in late 2004 but it wasn't until late 2006 that I actually put my head down and put the effort into my work.

At the start of 2007 I started working in the community garden at 115 Albert Street Footscray under the new order of our teacher Majella who to me is an outstanding and beautiful teacher with a heart of gold.

My maths teacher Padmini has also helped me to think more clearly and Padmini, like all the other teachers over the years, has taught me to believe in myself. Because of this I know that I can do better.

Next year I plan to go to VCE because I want to complete a degree in maths and I believe that I can and will do it. I also want to continue to work for Majella in the garden.

**Shane Kirby is a student at Victoria University TAFE in Footscray.**

## **Learning each day**

*by Luciano*

I have come to CAE because I am willing to learn English because I needed to improve myself. It's done me well. My spelling has improved. My writing has improved and I think education is good for you.

Now I speak English well. Before I could not communicate well, so attendance at CAE has done me good and I have gone longer with studying at CAE. I've got confidence and the class is very good because we can help each other. Sometimes we crack a joke and we have a good laugh together. It's good that we learn something each day.

# Learning journeys and life stories from regional Victoria

Students from schools in regional centres describe their pathways back to education. They identify the challenges they've faced and speak of a renewed sense of hope for the future.



## Learning every day

*by Sam*

I enjoyed school, learning, creating and making friends. But I became bored and I just couldn't be bothered with it so I made choices that I knew weren't good for me. I left school and had a child at the age of 16. By the age of 18 I had two kids. At that point in time I knew I had to make some life changing decisions. I would read constantly, get maths sheets printed off the internet and write small books about my life and my kids.

Now that my kids are at school I have decided it's time for me to further my education, so that when my kids come to me for help with homework and questions about our history or the world in general, I can answer them to the best of my ability. I am now married and have 5 more children—my

no writing from them, so I asked them to put their pen on the paper and just write whatever came into their heads. I told them I would time them and they could stop after five minutes and that they should just write whatever came to mind, no matter how silly or nonsensical it seemed to them. I said I wouldn't judge what they were writing and that the only objective was to get something down.

At the end of the class I took up what they'd written and was amazed that all of them had actually written on the topic with some of the most sincere writing I had seen from them. What they had written were statements about what they wanted to do with their lives over the next 3 to 5 years, which was part of the Develop and Document a Learning Plan unit. The technique was not one I had planned to use, and is certainly not suitable for all writing situations. Their block may have been fear of being judged on what they wrote, or my unspoken expectation

I enjoyed the computer class. There is so much more to learn. My teacher, Noelene, was very patient. However, the courses have changed and I have gone on to try my hand at something else.

Overall, every teacher is patient and the atmosphere is not as overwhelming as I thought it might be. Everyone should try giving Adult Education a go. It is about making new friends and finding out everyone has a story to tell.

**Karen Hand is a student with Continuing Education in Bendigo.**

## **My return to learning**

*by Jenni Mullen*

After years of disruptive schooling, due to the constant moving around for my Dad's work, non-understanding teachers and also peer group ridicule, I have returned to school. I feel enough confidence now that I can try again.

I enrolled at Continuing Education Bendigo three years ago and have done a few courses. I feel confident. The teachers are caring and the other students are friends, not just students. We are all in nearly the same age groups and are all there for the same reasons, to catch up on what we

Coming to ALBE, my confidence was still very low. I remember starting there sitting at the back, thinking this is school all over again. That thought lasted two days. I saw that everyone else was about my age and at the same level. I found the teachers to be interested which encouraged me to learn and enjoy my experience. I don't feel embarrassed to ask for help and keep on asking until I understand it. I find I'm not scared anymore of using the dictionary, and I keep it by my side looking up new words to express in my writing.

**Michelle Galante is a student at the Community Access Centre at Gippsland TAFE.**

## **A teacher's reflection**

*by Persephone Minglis*

The students, whose work I am submitting are part of a CGEA group at the Community Access Centre at Gippsland TAFE. There are 21 people at the moment, ranging in age from mid-teens to mid-fifties and ranging in ability from Certificate 1 (Introductory) to Certificate II. There are also two support workers. The strength of this class is a positive attitude to learning and support for each other as learners, which carries across the wide range of ages and experience.

about what to include and what to omit. This was done by conferencing with me, or a support worker. In the end, these students ended up with two pieces, a longer version and a shorter version to submit. Students wrote three drafts before they were happy with their final copy.

When I think back to the students' writing and reading when they first began, and when I look at their writing now and how confidently they express their views during discussion, it is such a big leap. It's terrific to be part of it.

**Persephone Minglis is a teacher at the Community Access Centre at Gippsland TAFE.**

## **My story**

*by Romeo Cabion*

My life has changed since I started at TAFE to read. Before, when I was reading a sentence, I was always stuck on a word. When I go out it's good now because I can read. It's a good feeling.

One day at the Mass of Anointing, Sister Joy came over to Mum and I and sat down and asked me, 'Would you read the Gospel?'

I have learned a lot and have made a lot of new friends. I feel very comfortable in my classes and enjoy coming.

I did my high school years at Moe High. I left in 1993, as there was a fire and the school burnt down. I lived with my Mum at the time.

Soon after, I decided to come to TAFE, to re-learn or just to learn things that I didn't get the chance to learn. I decided that I didn't do very well with maths and needed help but the teachers didn't have the time. I felt ignored. I often didn't get help from home either, so I had to look after myself.

My father lived in Wodonga with two of my sisters. My mother had shifted to Queensland. My Nan is the person I looked up to and was the person I went to for advice or help. My Nan also cared for another two of my sisters. My Nan helped me to get an apartment, because I felt I was too much trouble for my Nan. I then got an apartment with my girlfriend.

In 1997 I got a job at Safeway as a cashier to help pay my bills. Then I gave birth to my first child. In 2000 when I had my second child. I wanted to go back to school as soon as I could because I knew I had missed a lot of days and had not learned as much as I should have.

to myself, I will have to go back to school to right the problem that was wrong. It was traumatic not knowing how to translate the language that was holding me back from understanding 'right from wrong' with numeracy and literacy.

I have now made the choices to study and learn as an adult. Since I have come back to school my whole life has changed. I have been so better off going to school. Everything has been so clear and so full of understanding I can sleep at night. I have found out working out my maths problems has saved me lots of money that I can put back into my

education. I would like to go further with my awakening to the alphabet and figures.

**Robert Sierak is a student at the Community Access Centre at Gippsland TAFE.**



# Of people and places

A collection of writing describing the many characters, the family and friends, that may accompany us on the journey. There are also stories about the places that help to shape our view of the world.



## Homemaking with Helga: tip no. 23

*by Helen Seiler*

Can you believe how many types of air fresheners line our supermarkets shelves these days? Do we really smell that bad? Sure, things were a bit whiffy when my quads were young or when our Raymond opens his bedroom door, but what's wrong with a bit of a pong now and then. My hubby Angus hates air fresheners. He says our home has never been a bed of roses so why should it smell like one. He likes to walk in the back door and smell only one thing, us, the McGherkinshaws. So I do my best to keep it natural, except for ... well let me explain.

Our home's unique odour is a mixture of what I have endeavoured to cook over the past six days and what our digestive systems have done with the results. Add a pinch

the filth that covers him makes his whole appearance a shade of black.

He has shuffled for so long in fish guts, dog droppings and vomit that his unshod feet are now black lumps with barely discernible toes. His trouser legs are frayed and split and flap when he does a madman's dance. His hair, beard and darkened face merge to form a blob that rises above a plastic raincoat that has the sleeves ripped off.

At times he lies on his side against a wall with his arms wrapped tightly around his chest. At other moments he sleeps with his body twitching and lips moving with painful cries. One morning I saw him standing against the roughcast wall. His legs were straight and together. I didn't want to look, but a morbid curiosity drew my eyes. He moaned piteously with arms outstretched and

has been shaped and formed to produce a bitter, lonely and jaded member of society. Whether it is the nervous ticks he shows each day or the wall that barricades him from friends, Steve is living a very isolated and potentially dangerous life.

As Steve awakes to a new day, he must reassure himself that his dreams were only that. In his life he has ruined many relationships with anger, jealousy and insecurity. These relationships still haunt him today, in dreams, in fears and whenever the room turns dark and the night turns silent. But not everything is negative in his behaviour. From abuse and personal regret Steve has become a loyal, honest and caring man. It could have been to do with his new found faith or possibly because of emotional letdowns, but Steve is at his peak when it comes to being a good person. Yet the barriers still remain.

Nobody knows what he is afraid of, but Steve hasn't let many into his life. Steve refuses to use the word friend. In most cases, he prefers the term acquaintances. He talks to these people, sees them regularly, but he refuses to let them into his life. Like a full moon behind clouds, his true personality is hidden from the world. He doesn't seek perfection in anyone, but deep down he constantly fears they seek it in him. His world, his mind, is beyond perfection. He knows and understands his faults, but he embraces them. Steve

around him in need. Whether it is worldly treasures or an emotional touch, he always gives more than his guilty mind can receive.

As the sun rises on a cold dreary morning, so does hope rise in the presences of the year 2008. It has been a long struggling journey but Steve is beginning to picture what he has to offer. Now he can imagine just how much he can help in this dark and selfish world. His heart was once lost, searching the barrenness that was Steve's life of solitude. But in January his heart was found by another searching for friendship. Like a pile of dominoes, one after another all falling to place, Steve can see a much brighter, joyful world. He now sees the beauty in the word friendship, as friendship can see the beauty in him.

Steve's wall of bitterness and regret has been shaken. It is just a matter of time before it falls to the ground crashing all his fears and releasing possibilities that are endless. The once cold lifeless expression today shines with brightness and hope. The once embarrassingly defensive stagger has become a hopeful strut of confidence. This is only an example of how an emotional, abused boy in a man's body can be healed by the glory of a beautiful and fulfilling friendship. Today Steve continues his walk down the bumpy and long road of the relationship highway, and he isn't looking back for anything.

## A winter's day

by Julie Spragge

To be alone in the bush with the warmth of the sun on my back is my haven.

Serenely, I walk the tracks made for trekkers, warming up as I follow the slope of the land. I wait for a cool breeze to flow over me as I descend the path. The hat I wear shades my eyes from the bright sun reflecting from the granite outcrops surrounding me.

There are pretty birds, wrens and finches, so small, busy flying about in their daily rush to survive. White cockatoos and pink galahs screech as they fly overhead and the shrill cries of black crows in distant treetops can be heard.

I hear the soft flow of the river continuing on to a waterfall that splashes beyond its boundary. I listen to the gush of water swirling over the potholes made from many years of movement resulting in erosion.

I am engulfed by the pretty colours of grey trunks and brown strips of bark shed as the trees grow; the smell of bright yellow wattle that glows as if lit up at night and the hum of bees collecting pollen.

foundation that they can build upon, rely on, and experiment with, to find a platform from which they can ultimately fly.

As spelling is a frequent frustration for the majority of my students, we spend time developing phonic and memory skills and establishing an awareness of syllables. I encourage the use of dictionaries, spellers and individual index books so students feel confident at being able to access the correct spelling at all times. It was many years ago in the 1970's, when I became a disciple of Elsie Smelt, whose book *How to Speak, Spell and Read* outlines 'the orderly relationship between sound and letters in words'. For me, this has proved to be an exceptionally wonderful teaching theory.

Writing is encouraged through short regular writing exercises based on personal and familiar topics. To support and motivate the students in their writing activities, short well-written stories or extracts are read and explored for their inspirational qualities. Looking for descriptive words and creative ways of expressing views gives us a way of developing a scaffold to build up our writing techniques.

We all learn together, support and encourage each other and although we only meet once a week, the enthusiasm is carried with the students from lesson to lesson.

I would have to be one of the luckiest tutors to be able to work

the old man again. After that day I knew I couldn't judge a person through their appearance. 'You can't judge a book by its cover' as they say.

Dove is a student in the Access Department at Swinburne University of Technology TAFE.

## A teacher's reflection

*by Vittoria Grossi*

Writing in any genre is not something that comes easily and naturally to everyone. For some students it is the most challenging task they face in our course. I feel the starting point is to inspire writing by making the task relevant and interesting to the learner.

With this in mind I called the task 'A learning journal'. In it the students were asked to write about significant moments or critical moments in their learning experiences, both in formal and informal situations. As we were exploring essay writing tasks in the areas of globalisation I encouraged the students to think about their cross-cultural experiences. What surprised them when they came here? How did they react to this? How are things different from their own country? Students were asked to think about how everyday activities are organised differently in Australia; transport, schooling, shopping, eating. If these

## Names

*by Nora*

Hi Gina! Hi Catherine!

If somebody told me two years ago that I would be calling my teachers by their first name, I would think he or she was crazy.

Nowadays, if I called my teachers by their surname, they would be worried about me and my mental health. The change did not come about because of different times but because of a different place and culture.

In my culture, nobody dares to call teachers, bosses or older people by their first name. It is rude. We use it only between members of our family, to call brothers and sisters, wife or husband, or for parents to call their children. We also use it between really close friends.

Although our teacher or boss can be our friend, we call him or her by their surname to show respect. It took me a long time until I stopped feeling guilty after using my teacher's first name. Here I had to learn a new sense of names. Our first name is not such a private thing to be only used by our relatives. Our surname is not so unique to be only used for our identification.

# The poetry of learning

A teacher and her students, based at NMIT Epping, use poetry as a means to shed light on the twists and turns in their learning journeys.



## My life

*by Joe Galati*

Going to school until the age of eleven  
Mum and Dad said that was the rule  
They were busy with a family of ten  
And had little time for me.  
Life back then, was distracted in Italy.

I left home at fifteen, full of awe and wonder  
On an old ship for a country far away  
Seasickness brought me to my knees, but  
A strange fruit from a banana tree  
Brought life back to me.

I landed in Australia, a country full of dust  
Where I had to earn my crust.

The students have developed confidence over the year by engaging in a variety of writing genres. This particular group of students is participating in work experience this semester. When they were asked to decide on their choice of work placement one of the students said that she wanted to be a mechanic because she was passionate about Ford motor cars. So much so that she often wrote poetry about Fords. I encouraged her to write the class a poem. She embraced the idea and with her permission I used her poem in a unit of work we were doing on language analysis.

This generated a lot of interest. I have found that using a student's work in class often encourages others to have the confidence to believe in their own ability a little more. I suggested that we could all have a play with the idea of everyone writing their own poem. The theme was to be a reflection of their school life—looking back, looking forward and looking at now.

## Fights and rumbles

*by Dion*

Fights and rumbles this is where my school life  
crumbled

Always getting into trouble during my school years I  
didn't learn much

Apart from recess and lunch

Detention to expulsion.

But now I am back doing adult education

The beginning of a new foundation makes

Me wonder why I ever left, maybe

I should have become a teacher's pet.

Damm how could I forget being a class clown

I laughed then but I cry now this

Troubled life got me walking with my head

Down flashing frowns am I wrong

Guess I'll never know so I carry on.

I left school to follow in my daddy's shoes

Now I think with my head and I fight with my pen.

I followed someone who is almost dead and buried.

I find myself walking through

The cemetery talking to the dirt.

Dear Lord take away all the hurt

And show me some happiness again I am going blind.

Some memories

I met my best mate Matt

Always smiling and talking

I'll never forget those chats

In high school

Lots of memories

I met the best mates ever

We were always there together

And looked out for one another

Now I've moved to Aussie

It's hard for us all

But I hope our friendship

Will never fall

Back to school

Met lots of new friends

Laughing and full of chatter

Still rubbish at English

But it doesn't matter

English is getting better

Learning more each day

And building more memories

That will always stay

Then the fun slowly fades  
Like the falling fog  
Under the spell of the nuns  
Nowhere to go  
Nowhere to hide  
Waiting for the end of class to come  
Make up and hair  
Was on my mind  
Girls just wanna have fun.

Now at forty  
Back I go  
It was frightening then  
But now it's fun  
Just like the first day  
One thing has changed  
I have a choice  
So off I go to learning land  
Just like Alice in Wonderland.

### **Back again**

*by Tracey Casha*

Walking to school pick up my friend  
Playing on the monkey bars till the bell rang  
My teacher was beautiful

I'll just do my best.

### **Bits and pieces**

*by Marlene Parker*

I don't remember too much about school  
Just bits and pieces  
I remember walking  
With my brother  
The fog was so thick  
We would Cooee to each other.

My favourite sports  
Were rounders and basketball  
Being competitive against the other schools  
I loved it.

I would sit  
Behind the biggest in the class  
Hiding from the teachers  
Afraid of what they would ask  
And if I was wrong I would be embarrassed  
That was long ago  
When I was young.

Now after forty years plus three

I have met new people and made some friends  
But that's how school was when I was ten  
Tables and chairs have replaced desks  
Where you sit in groups and not in pairs.

At seventeen you had no fears  
Youth was on your side  
No doubts, no problems, no worries  
The world was big and bright  
Now at fifty the future is uncertain  
Will you get work again?  
Or will you fall under the Centrelink burden?

## **A new beginning**

*by Dianne Thomson*

Going back to class twenty years later  
Apprehension is what I felt,  
Would I still remember how to learn  
Or would I make a fool of myself?

A new set of rules, no uniform  
No teenage angst or jealousy,  
Only help and understanding  
That comes with maturity.

Main gate too far around  
Side gate out of bounds  
My friend and I always caught  
Taking the short cut home.

In Grade Six  
Sneaking around  
Unlocking the doors  
In the school grounds  
My friend and I had a ball  
Confusing the prefect  
To no end at all.

Transition to secondary went well  
Teachers were great  
Kids were swell  
This is the year I remember so well.

Got into fights  
Over stupid things  
Started to talk  
Then became best friends.

Playing students against teachers  
In hockey was great  
Treated as equals  
Was part of the game