

Creative Arts and Language Learning

Writing! With limited vocabulary, limited education in their first language, and limited self-confidence, the task of writing for many low level ESL/literacy students is daunting.

My class consists of approximately 18 young adult migrant refugees, mostly from countries in Africa, who have enrolled full-time in the YAMEC (Young Adult Migrant Education Course) at NMIT to improve their ESL/literacy and basic education, in the hope of continuing further study or of getting a job. Many of the students have little or no classroom experience or associated study skills to draw upon and so their needs are vast. Their learning environment must provide a safe place where there is a sense of trust amongst the group and, at the same time, be stimulating for young people.

Learning through the creative arts has proven to be a very successful way of engaging students to achieve positive learning outcomes in our program. For the second year running we have collaborated with the Brotherhood of St Lawrence/EMC to deliver the Connect-In program. This year community artists from the RYAP (Rotary Youth Arts Project) were employed once a week for 9 weeks to team teach with me. Through photography, dance and drama we enabled students to share creative, enjoyable language learning experiences that culminated in an end of term presentation. Each week the students were asked to record their experiences. Who did they meet, where did they go, what did they do and how did they feel. They interviewed people they met, they described things they saw and did and helped each other to put it all onto paper. Part of my roll was to check their work before they then word-processed it in computer class. Asking the students to read their draft writing aloud with a teacher, correcting spelling, punctuation and grammar as they go, I think, is the most helpful method of improving their writing skills. Meaningful communication rather than perfection with low literacy levels should be the aim.

Through the enjoyment and satisfaction of creating artistic work we have all benefited. We have shared authentic experiences through meaningful communication.

Julie Palmer is an ESL/literacy teacher in the YAMEC program, Youth Unit NMIT Collingwood.