

# **four seasons in one day –**

**literacies in changing climates**

Adult Literacy Conference ■ Melbourne ■ September 10-11, 2004



## **A change in the weather for adult literacy and numeracy?**

**Paper for the 2004 ACAL Conference, Melbourne,  
reporting on an NCVER project titled: 'Building literacy  
and numeracy capabilities in communities: learning from  
exemplary practice'.**

**Rosie Wickert & Jenny McGuirk**

**Please note: At the time of writing this paper, the project had not  
been completed, so the work is still 'in-progress'. A final report  
will be produced for the NCVER later in the year.**

## Background/context

As nations struggle to adapt to rapid technological, economic and social change, 'new' ways of responding to the challenges thrown up by such change are being investigated. One such change concerns the role of government in the provision of services. As a result, much attention is being paid by governments to notions of social capital, community capacity building and social partnership approaches to policy and provision. In addition, governments and social agencies are acknowledging the limitations of unconnected 'silo' responses to social issues and moving to more joined-up and 'whole-of-government' approaches.

A major challenge is how to achieve the skilled workforces and citizens necessary to meet the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The 2004 United Nations Human Development Index ranks Australia third in the world (behind Norway and Sweden) based on life expectancy, education and living standards. However, Australia also has the second highest number of people living below the income poverty line, at 14.3%.<sup>1</sup> The report also states that one in six Australians cannot read basic medical instructions and that 17% of the population are functionally illiterate.

There are other drivers that contribute to the sense of urgency that skills development must be more coordinated, effective and sustained. These include evidence that too many young people leave school ill-prepared for life beyond, an impending severe shortage of skilled labour, the loss of routine jobs and the large numbers of older people needing to manage their affairs in ways not required in their younger years

The social and economic consequences of poor skills go far beyond the individual. Social researchers point to the decline of rural and regional communities, noting that industry will move to where the skills are and skilled workers follow accordingly<sup>2</sup>. Increasingly the crisis rhetoric of individuals and communities being 'left behind' and 'socially excluded' is invoked. Related to this is a growing awareness of the importance of both life-long and life-wide learning; of the recognition that learning occurs across lives and in all kinds of places and situations.

There is evidence of renewed energy for policy attention to such concerns in Australia. For example, in the broader scope of the ANTA Strategy *Shaping the Future*; the recent Senate Enquiry on Lifelong Learning; the heightening concern to reach national agreement on generic skills development; whole-of-government and whole-of-community strategies in a number of States; and a proliferation of reports grappling with ways of reporting outcomes in non-traditional learning contexts.

Do these changing emphases herald a change in the weather for adult literacy and numeracy? In terms of adult literacy and numeracy, Australia has enjoyed international recognition for its policies and provision, particularly, in more recent times, in relation to the integration of workplace literacy and numeracy programs into vocational training and the partnerships built around this. Nonetheless, in line with the concerns raised above, a number of reports (nationally and internationally) have increasingly argued for a new policy direction for adult literacy – one that is mindful of concerns about social capital, that contributes to a more holistic and integrated response to social issues and builds on the contribution of literacy to community capacity building, as in exemplary workplace literacy programs. One intention of the project was to learn from these workplace

<sup>1</sup> Sydney Morning Herald 16.7.04, <http://smh.com.au/articles/2004/07/15/1089694492537.html?oneclick=true>).

<sup>2</sup> Eg. Mackay, H (1999) *Turning Point: Australians choosing their future*, Sydney, Macmillan; Cowan, M (2004) Beyond single interests: broad-based organizing as a vehicle for promoting adult literacy in Comings, J., Garner, B. & C. Smith *Review of adult learning and literacy, Volume 6: Connecting research, policy and practice*, Lawrence Erlbaum & Associates

initiatives and further develop our thinking about integrated approaches and what they mean. Are there other ways of 'building-in' literacy and numeracy skills development into peoples' lives?

## The intent of the project

It is most important to stress that this was an exploratory project. In some early documents, we described it as a 'small step in the direction of acquiring a clearer understanding of how literacy and numeracy learning outcomes are being or might be achieved in what we, at that time, called 'cross-sectoral' approaches. We wanted to look at the kinds of ways adult literacy and numeracy skills are being developed through partnerships, 'joined-up' or 'whole-of-government' initiatives in a range of policy areas and also at how our knowledge of successful workplace literacy projects could contribute to a clearer understanding of the potential of joined-up approaches? We knew of the excellent work underway with young people and in some Indigenous communities, which is why we limited the scope of our study to other social policy areas. Our intention was to build on what is already known about partnerships between TAFE/ACE and other sectors and to explore further the challenges and possibilities for building adult literacy and numeracy skill development through the work of other service providers and community based welfare and community development agencies.

In exploring these aims, we looked for examples of cross-sectoral projects, programs or partnerships and approaches which refer to literacy and numeracy learning in their programs, but for whom education and training is not their core business. We asked what approach to literacy and numeracy is taken in such projects/programs and how success in literacy/numeracy learning is measured. We were also interested to find out about the barriers or challenges that might exist in the way of successfully integrating literacy and numeracy learning into their program? Overarching our interest in local initiatives was a desire to understand more about what a whole-of-government or joined-up approach to literacy and numeracy capacity building might look like on the ground. Internationally we were particularly interested in any broader policies and frameworks in place that frame and support building literacy and numeracy learning in partnership with other sectors, rather than the specifics of local programs.

## Methodology: How did we go about it?

The methodological approach to this exploratory project is iterative. That is, we really did not know where it might take us as each step was informed by the findings of the previous steps: The steps were:

- ✧ A literature survey around a number of key words such as 'adult literacy and numeracy' with 'social capital', 'whole-of-government', 'integrated', 'family/intergenerational literacy', 'community development', 'partnership' and so on.
- ✧ Trawls of databases and search engines using the above, or similar, key words
- ✧ Identification of community sites through the searches above, plus contact with formal networks such as literacy councils, the Australian Institute of Family Studies, the Australian Institute of Welfare and Community Workers, the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing, the Australian Institute of Criminology, the project reference group, and informal networks
- ✧ Identification of 'exemplary' workplace sites through the DEST website, Literacy Link, ACAL conference papers and national and state WELL coordinators who were asked to nominate two of their most successful projects
- ✧ A 'think tank' held in association with the ACAL strategy group
- ✧ Information gained during two overseas trips (not funded by the project).

As we have said, the investigation was a small one. Excluded from the scope of the study were programs that targeted Indigenous people, ESL programs, people with a disability and programs funded through the federal Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program

(LLNP) for job-seekers. The following criteria were used to limit our search for and selection of programs or initiatives. We wanted to find programs that:

- ✧ are working in partnership with other agencies or make reference to a whole-of-government or joined-up perspective to their work
- ✧ make some reference to/or strongly imply a literacy and or numeracy element, although this is not the key focus
- ✧ make explicit reference to impact or outcomes
- ✧ are not based in education institutions or driven by institutional practices such as curriculum and timetables
- ✧ are inclusive of young people, but not exclusive to them.

## Preliminary findings

- ✧ It proved very hard to find many examples of projects or programs that met all our criteria. It is probably fair to say that only one of our eventual sites matched all the criteria. We were after all looking for embedded or integrated literacy and numeracy learning. So the lack of evidence of such activity, beyond workplace and youth programs, may have been as much a reflection of our criteria as an accurate reflection of what is happening. Of those we did find, some were short-term one-off initiatives and had finished, sometimes with no apparent follow-up work intended or possible.
- ✧ Literacy and numeracy skill development may be 'embedded' in or be recognised as a potential outcome of many of the projects, but it is not always clear how this development is addressed, nor how any learning of such skills is 'counted' or recorded. This is not a criticism of the projects but is an indication of the difficulties of 'building literacy and numeracy in' in ways that enable explicit, recorded literacy and numeracy outcomes for project participants.
- ✧ It was interesting to find that there is also little, if any, mention of literacy/numeracy in most major national social policy strategies. The notion of 'life-wide' learning with its potential to build literacy and numeracy capability has yet to be embraced in other social policy areas.
- ✧ It is unlikely, therefore, that workers in other social policy areas are attuned to such possibilities and able to engage with adult literacy and numeracy issues or see how they may contribute to improving adult literacy and numeracy through their own work. Awareness of such possibilities and how to build on them would need to be built into their training.
- ✧ Having said this, however, there are mixed views about the impact on program participants of explicit attention to literacy and numeracy learning. The dilemma of integrating literacy and numeracy learning while at the same time explicitly assessing and recording learning success was a theme coming through the literature as well as a number of the projects.
- ✧ Some states are working on cross-sectoral, 'joined-up' responses to social issues such as school retention, drug use and youth unemployment. Victoria and South Australia are working on ways of enabling young people to gain credit for informal learning outcomes. Tasmania is working on a whole-of-state approach to literacy learning throughout life. These developments will no doubt assist in engaging other 'front-line' workers to support their clients to achieve learning outcomes.
- ✧ Although we are aware that a number of schools are working to involve parents in supporting the literacy learning of their children, most interest in family or intergenerational literacy initiatives in Australia seems to have faded out in the mid 1990s. There are just a few scattered examples of current programs. This is not the case in the USA, Canada and the UK.
- ✧ Agencies are frustrated by short term project funding and find it hard to keep momentum going when the money runs out. There is evidence in projects with longer-term funding of a growing appreciation of and commitment to designing program elements that enable their clients achieve real pathway possibilities.
- ✧ From our analysis of workplace programs we learnt of the importance of the following: the quality of the partnership between the workplace and the provider; the skill and

flexibility of the trainers involved; recognising and building on the existing skills of workers; and an acceptance of the time needed for literacy skills to develop. This issue of a common acceptable language was also raised.

- ✧ There were mixed reports about the capacity of education providers to be sufficiently flexible and responsive in their approach to collaboration in the community projects. There is some evidence that there is a lack of cross-sectoral appreciation for, or understanding of, what different agencies might be trying to achieve. We also learnt of the difficulties with using RPL.
- ✧ Even where agencies come together, there is no common language or policy framework outside V ET within which they can work and which can help drive things forward. Different project funds mean different reporting requirements and the wasted energy that goes with this. A common strategy could, at the least, improve this. Even where local partnerships have been established (eg through a Victorian Local Learning Employment Network or a Learning Town), it seems that they are not yet achieving the collaboration and innovation hoped for – to some they are seen as just another committee, another hoop to go through to acquire some project funding.

## Where to from here?

We can learn from experiences overseas about ways of managing 'joined-up' approaches. For example, the Birmingham Core Skills Development Partnership<sup>3</sup> has enjoyed notable success in its attempts to raise the 'core' skills of its citizens. Critical elements of the success of the Birmingham initiative have been its long term nature – a 10-20 year view with an initial 5-7 year plan, its emphasis on a strategic, whole of system approach, its pragmatic use of what works (and leaps of faith that what works on a small scale will also work on a large scale), its focus on 'change' rather than 'projects', 'products', 'budgets', and the passion and commitment of key players who have been with the partnership since its inception.

Another example is that of the Literacy Alliance of Greater New Orleans, a broad-based collective of literacy providers and learners, leaders from business, local government, faith-based organizations and higher education and one of a number of localised alliances in the USA. The Alliance has been working collaboratively for 18 months to expand and systematically improve literacy learning opportunities for adults. Michael Cowan sees the Alliance's work as an example of developing bridging social capital<sup>4</sup>. Board members whose primary concern is adult literacy are now part of the business community's local workforce-development effort; others have joined local church leaders to explore the possibility of using the bible study tradition as a literacy enhancement opportunity; and others are working with local health practitioners to effectively connect literacy with health care.

There are lessons here for similar alliances to be formed in Australia. We do have a history of inter-agency networks, but they have remained local and relatively 'junior'. We need a far more systematic approach with high-level commitment and expectations, as in the UK where a Cabinet Committee oversees the implementation of the adult basic skills national strategy.

There is a need to map the possibilities across the Australian system for greater organizational collaboration for literacy across social policy areas such as health, youth, housing, welfare, crime prevention, families and community development. Understanding these possibilities is, of course, a significant factor in developing a national approach

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.coreskills.co.uk/index.html>

<sup>4</sup> Putnam (in Cowan 2004 p. 7) distinguishes between bonding and bridging (or linking) forms of social capital. Bonding social capital involves trust and reciprocity where members of a network know each other and help each other to 'get by' on a daily basis. Bridging or linking social capital though is needed to 'get on' by relating to people in other networks and in authority.

around a nationally agreed set of priorities. The numerous State initiatives, while laudable, often result in fragmented services and confusion at a national level about the uses of Commonwealth literacy and numeracy funds. It is difficult to obtain consistent data across States because of the different departments, funding models, policies and so on.

If, as we will argue in our final report, social capital and community capacity building provide useful tools for looking at adult literacy and numeracy policy, to what extent do current adult literacy and numeracy policies and provision have the potential to develop sustainable bonding, bridging and linking social capital? To what extent do adult literacy and numeracy learning opportunities go beyond the immediate context of the classroom or the curriculum in ways that get to count for the individuals and communities concerned? What kinds of continuity between programs are there? What sorts of collaborations and partnerships are possible with other sectors and agencies that can lead to recognised learning outcomes? Community building is a shared responsibility. How do we develop trust between individuals, agencies and sectors? How can the barriers to such collaborations be reduced to so as to enable literacy learning to occur? What kinds of roles might literacy and numeracy educators play in such a climate?

Nicole Gilding (1999, p.28), although speaking in the context of strengthening pathways for young people, provides a fitting endnote to this paper:

*Planning for partnerships and pathways needs a robust understanding of literacy as a social practice played out in every social, family, work and learning context, subject to change but constantly in public policy attention. Literacy is an essential ingredient in the mix. Literacy outcomes should be recognized from any intervention or pathway. Literacy appears fundamental to the empowerment of agencies to meet needs at the community level, for communities to engage in decision making and to articulate those needs, and to the provision at local level whether that provision is delivered through a welfare, health, housing, or educational conduit...literacy is part of the glue that can make new strategic partnerships stick together and work<sup>5</sup>*

<sup>5</sup> Nicole Gilding, Seizing the moment: opportunities at the intersection of literacy and youth policy, in Living Literacies: papers from the 1999 ACAL/VALBEC conference, Melbourne, pp.24-28, VALBEC, Melbourne