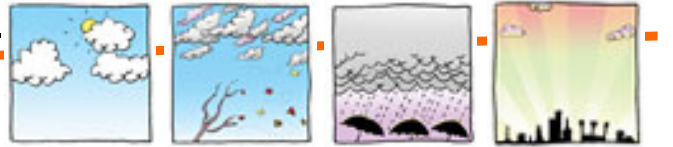


# **four seasons in one day –**

**literacies in changing climates**

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



## **Constructing Utopia – constructing literacy and numeracy in a remote indigenous NT community**

**Janine Oldfield**

**Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Education, NT**

## ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a collaborative teaching effort between two Central Australian Indigenous teaching institutions for the newly emerging Desert People's Centre, one a construction trades training institute (Centre For Applied Technology – CAT) and the other an academic institute (Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education). Previous collaboration had occurred on a minimal level in previous years. However, this particular collaboration is of one year duration, entailing teaching two certificates concurrently (Certificate I in Written and Spoken English and Certificate II in Applied Design and Technology), is based in a remote community (Utopia), revolves around a landscaping project for the newly built study centre at Arlparra and comprises of women students only most of whom have few English language skills.

The project and teaching commitment were undertaken to determine if successful outcomes for both courses could be enhanced on the basis of constructivist principles. That is, creating learning tasks and a learning environment that both stimulates learning and provides a concrete basis on which to learn difficult western literacy and numeracy concepts inherent in both courses. This paper will report on the outcomes so far of the project, of using particular literacy and numeracy strategies, tasks and methodologies and attempt to ascertain reasons for their success or lack of success in terms of personal development and competency achievement. It will also attempt to make recommendations for future VET projects and training in remote NT indigenous communities, particularly in regards to trades.

## The Utopia Garden Project - history

The Utopia Garden Project arose out of prior collaborative efforts of Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Education (BIITE) and the Centre for Appropriate Technology (CAT) that began in 2002. These collaborations were based in Alice Springs, were short in duration (2 weeks), involved CSWE-1 women groups from a mixture of communities and the completion of well-planned discrete construction projects with well-defined tasks, such as making a picture frame, making a tucker box and making a crow-bar. While CAT delivered the construction modules in their Certificate 1 in Applied Design and Technology (CADT), BIITE delivered the Certificate I in Written and Spoken English (CSWE-1). Literacy and Numeracy materials were designed to support the tasks in CADT, both in terms of preparation for oral and numeracy tasks required by the project tasks as well as support. That is, the literacy and numeracy resources were contextualised in terms of the projects and, although joint planning was involved, language delivery occurred largely separately from the construction modules but language skills were orally and visually reinforced during the course of construction tasks. However, joint delivery in the classroom did occur in the preparation stages for the construction project (such as reading plans and measurement).

The apparent success of the collaborations led the CAT and CSWE-1 BIITE teacher to approach both BIITE and CAT regarding a longer term project (a year's duration) in order to better verify the apparent success of pilot programs and give the students a chance at completing the CADT. We also enlisted the expertise of a local Indigenous organization, Tangentyere Council, who supplied a lot of the knowledge, materials and management of an intensive two-week phase of the project which entailed irrigation, the construction of paths, garden beds as well as plantings. Students from the Utopia community were selected as prospective participants due to their higher than average motivation and course participation and the fact that they came from one geographical region so that delivery could be on-site and the physical 'outcomes' (the infrastructure created as a result of the project) would have an enduring use for both the students and the wider community. Most importantly, however, strong personal relationships were already developed between the CAT and BIITE teachers and tutors and the 20 students with teachers and tutors having worked with the students for a year. That is, the year long project sought to make some definitive conclusions about the ability of a content-based program in accelerating literacy and numeracy acquisition as well as whether intensive literacy and numeracy context based support would enhance the learning outcomes of a nationally accredited VET course in low level learners.

This paper will largely deal with the outcomes so far of this collaborative project based on-site at Batchelor's study centre in Arlparra, involving the participation of the 20 Utopia women ranging in age from their early 20s to their 80s, ranging in English language skills from preliminary CSWE-1 to CSWE-1 and entailing the design and construction of a garden for the study centre. The tasks include designing the garden, concreting, making seats and barbecues, making garden beds and selecting and planting native species as well as making paths. Although the project is still in its formative stages, a number of issues have become apparent that have impacted considerably on the outcome of the project. These include the historical, cultural and social context in which the project is situated, the project itself providing a context in which students can engage in 'real life' literacy and numeracy activities, successful methodologies so far employed to enhance literacy and numeracy levels in both courses, the high literacy and numeracy demands of the Construction Training Package and the embedded cultural concepts entailed. Some of these factors have impacted so negatively on particular outcomes of the project, that none of the students have achieved construction competencies after eight months of participation. Such findings have widespread repercussions for trades training in other remote localities.

## Constructing Utopia

The title of this paper derives its name from the area in which our joint BIITE and CAT project is situated. Known as the 'Sandover Region', it is approximately 200km north east of Alice Springs. It can be regarded as Utopian in many respects in terms of the richness of the languages, culture, the soil and plant and animal life that subsidise the overpriced and nutritionally poor western foods available from community shops (Richardson, 2003: 56).

The Arlparra garden project itself could also be perceived as an ideal post-colonial 'experiment' of literacy and numeracy acquisition in the United Nations Literacy Decade with the promise of an 'increase in the absolute numbers of those who are literate' facilitated by partnerships 'at the national level, ... government, civil society, the private sector and local communities' and delivered and acquired in meaningful ways. But it is not a Utopian post-colonial experiment. While many of the students have succeeded in many preliminary CSWE-1 and some CSWE-1 competencies, they have not achieved one construction competency.

Why has vocational education delivered in partnership between two central Australian Indigenous Education organizations with the input and support of another Indigenous organization and the local community and entailing the delivery of Design, Construction and literacy and numeracy competencies not delivered on its promise of upskilling remote Indigenous community members using applied tasks? The answer is complex and is in part due to prior neglect of successive territory and federal governments in terms of both education and the development of a sustainable economy in remote areas.

## The constructing students

### Utopian History

The Sandover area from which most of the 20 CSWE-1 and CADT is known as Utopia – which, until quite recently, was Utopia pastoral station and currently has a population of 1000 people dispersed across 17 outstations (Kral and Schwab, 2003:7). Students largely come from three main outstations whereby outstations can comprise of one or a few families to more sizeable communities. The furthest outstation is one hour from Arlparra (a major community centre), but most range from 15 to 30 minutes. The two major languages spoken by the group is Eastern Anmatyerr and Alywarr and it is in these languages that the students predominantly converse, speaking halting English to the few white English speakers in Utopia (largely shop-owners and hawkers).

Since white contact, the region has been a site of western exploitation, in terms of human and natural resources, and Indigenous 'pacification' including various massacres leading to the almost complete genocide of Anmatyerre people by 1901. Initially investigated for mineral deposits, it was then invaded by pastoralists in the 1920s under the auspices and sanction of the colonial state. It wasn't long before few native plants and animals remained on the land, and the locals had little choice but to become 'enslaved' by the lease holders under the approval of the Federal Chief Protector and the sub-Protector of the Aborigines in the region (the latter being policemen, one of whom was involved in a massacre). Despite the land purchase for the locals by the Aboriginal Land Fund Commission in 1976 and its conversion to inalienable Aboriginal title, this exploitation continues today in the form of art and perishable goods hawkers (Richardson, 2003: 60-77,101).

As with other Indigenous groups, the treatment of the people of Utopia reflects the effects of racialised exclusive discourse and a western rule governed causal view of the

social and natural worlds that is intimately intertwined with the Antiquity notions of 'essences' 'ideals' and 'universalisms' (Malik, 1996:220, Tuhiwai Smith, 1999:42-44). It is these notions which form a cohesive, totalising and atomistic understanding of diverse and disparate 'peoples' encountered in colonial enterprises and the view of 'civilised' European as the 'ideal' (or norm) from which the relative positions of 'other' groups are measured and branded 'inferior' and 'primitive' (Hollingsworth, 1998:36,37). As such, the Indigenous people of Utopia were judged by white pastoralists and others as being deficient, 'unable to advance beyond grade 3' and generally 'unemployable' as recently as 1994 (Bob Purvis Jnr, Letter to Pastoral Branch, Darwin, 10/1/94 in Richardson, 2003:77).

## Education in Utopia

It is with these views in mind that we must now turn to Educational experiences of the BIITE, CSWE-1 group in Utopia prior to the BIITE/CAT Project. It wasn't until 1969 that a primary school was established in the region, largely due to the resistance of pastoral leasees (there has never been a high school). According to those who have taught in the area, the school (or rather caravan), while incapable of servicing most Indigenous children in the region (only servicing 20% by 1979), was also woefully inadequate in terms of addressing curricula required by them, being a product of the Welfare Branch which sought to create 'workers compliant to (pastoral industry) needs' as opposed to creating a path to tertiary education (Richardson, 2003:96,109). This was largely a consequence of the 'essentialised' nature in which the local population was viewed and the discourse of 'cultural inability' that was applied to them (Richardson, 2003:112).

The substandard education service was also a result of the generally 'obstructionist' administration of the governing body that had jurisdiction over the school as well as the high staff turn-over, inadequate facilities and conditions and inadequate training of staff as well as extremely low educational department objectives and erratic funding that proved to be features from the school's inaugural year to three decades later (Richardson, 2003:114, 133, 147, 158, 183).

The legacy of this pointed marginalisation is that the vast majority of adults currently living in Utopia are functionally illiterate and innumerate and highly dependent on the vagaries of white interlopers, including the BIITE/CAT project group. Those with any significant literacy and numeracy (30% of the group) attended Yirara College, a boarding college for Indigenous students, in Alice Springs for approximately 9 years but operate at NRS Level 1, or Year 3 or 4, at best. However, as with other remote Indigenous communities, extensive research on the literacy and numeracy levels in Utopia has been deemed too problematic (Kral and Schwab, 2003: 1).

## The students

The majority of students are enrolled as pre-CSWE-1 (preliterate). Although they generally have quite low written literacy skills, they have been engaged in literacy training for some years and so have a number of preliterate skills already, such as the manual dexterity, fine motor coordination and eye-hand coordination needed for writing letters and numbers (Gunn, 2003:49). Living in an environment where there are multiple languages spoken, and where oracy is integral to all communication, the students also possess good English language comprehension skills. However, their speaking skills are limited, largely as a result of 'survival' behaviours and strategies developed over the years where the students can participate in a conversation using 'highly simple code', being quite conservative in the amount that they speak (see also Hakuta, Butler and Witt, 2000:2). Consequently, on analysis, student responses are largely single words and

they can't participate in conversations of any depth. This could also partly be transference from their first language where economy of speech (using verbs only) is quite common where topics are superficial or apparent (such as objects in the distance).

The general historical and social context in which the students live has also created poor health status in many with most suffering diabetes and some suffering heart conditions, poor hearing and poor eyesight – all of which have inhibited learning.

Due to the limited educational and literacy experiences of the students discussed above, in many respects, the Utopia students share some of the same characteristics as Australian Migrant Education Service students from the Horn of Africa, as discussed by Slikas Barber (2002:5). These characteristics include

- Lack of understanding of the purpose of tasks and activities (probably a product of cultural dissimilarity).
- Have difficulty following instructions, particularly written ones.
- Difficulty in taking risks in their learning.
- Like routine and repetition in their learning.
- Need a slower pace of instruction and learning.
- Rely on the teacher to direct all learning.
- Be easily distracted and lack concentration.
- Come and go in class due to family and other priorities (resulting in different class composition of students at every workshop).

In common with the Horn of Africa students, the Utopia students are also very unfamiliar with written conventions such as punctuation and clause structure and an apparent lack of organization of ideas (for those who can write). The latter, I suggest is probably also a consequence of disparate genres in the first culture. As opposed to the Horn of Africa students however, and probably as a consequence of some years already of study, the Utopia students are conversant with classroom interactions (Slikas Barber, 2002:5).

The Utopia students also differ in a number of salient ways in their rate of absenteeism. Lack of participation is also accounted for by 'sorry business' (which can go for some weeks) due to the appalling health of many remote indigenous community members and early and high rates of mortality. In addition, there are also a number of factors that 'impose' on their time, apart from family, child-care and ill-health, and these include Land Council meetings, visiting dignitaries from and meetings with territory and federal government bodies, cultural and ceremonial obligations and the need to go hunting when funds run low. That is, there are quite high demands on the students' time and it is only through the high motivation of the students that participation happens at all!

## **Constructivism in Utopia – Constructing Methodology**

As a result of a limited exposure to both English language and culture, there is an apparent 'absence' of fundamental 'western' concepts in the students involved in this project, as well as others we have taught over the years who hail from quite diverse and disparate cultures in Central Australia (see below for a further discussion). It is for this reason that the teachers in this project view knowledge as a socially constructed phenomenon. Consequently, we view language as the tool through which to create social meaning, and thereby, language as a culturally and socially embedded phenomenon (see Cole and Wertsch, n.d.). Our approach, therefore, attempts to capture this view by making learning and literacy and numeracy tasks experiential and meaningful. The task-based and content-based approach (in terms of construction) that is endemic in the delivery lends itself well to these views of learning.

The success of task based and content based approaches is supported by other research which suggests engagement in tasks provides a superior context for language learning where the emphasis is on the process and interactive communication (Richards and Rodgers, 2001:223). Research has also indicated that a task-based approach suggests engagement in tasks provides a superior context for language learning where the emphasis is on the process and interactive communication (Richards and Rodgers, 2001:223). That is, the focus is on both inputs and outputs as opposed to the latter in Competency Based Training (CBT). And, as Brinton et al (1989, cited in Richards and Rodgers, 2001:209) notes in content-based approaches, 'language is presented in a meaningful, contextualised form with the primary focus on acquiring information'. This is not more obvious than when a student has to engage with the machinations of a ferocious cutting machine!

In this approach, students are acknowledged to bring with them 'knowledge and previous experience' (Richards and Rodgers, 2001:211). At BIITE, we tend to do theme-based approaches in the CSWE-1 courses anyway, where the topic or context (particularly in regards to social justice issues, students' interests and knowledge of the outside world) drives the language objectives. This of course, has to be tempered due to the competency based nature of CSWE-1 which, in fact, is quite the opposite where language objectives determine the content. So, there is an obvious tension occurring between a more exploratory, relativist and humanist approach and CBT. There is also an attempt to use authentic materials where possible but due to the level of students, or as a consequence of a lack of availability of materials, particularly those written and of interest to Indigenous people and relevant to their social context, often materials are created or modified in order to enhance comprehensibility, suitability and interest. In terms of this project, these considerations have manifested in the creation of 'model' texts derived from the tasks themselves and the student's own oral knowledge living in the 'bush' and living in an Indigenous culture.

Both CAT and BIITE also share a pedagogical philosophy of Both Ways. Although this is loosely defined by both institutions, it invariably means in practice using the cultural 'artefacts' and 'tools' of the students where possible in order to gain a shared meaning and create shared discourses and access to dominant discourses as well as the creation of multiple Indigenous identities that usurp existing colonial narratives. It also entails educating 'white' people so that they are more effective teachers of Indigenous people (Jordon, 2002). In this project, this has manifested in the design of the garden (using the traditional Tjurkupa design of one elder in the course), incorporating their lifestyle in aspects of design (such as outdoor sleeping and eating areas), learning the students language and cultural protocols and incorporating this into classroom practice, and incorporating the students' cultural interests and knowledge into the curriculum (such as the identification of plants and making and describing bush medicines). As such, even in terms of English, there is a degree of "Aboriginalisation" and localisation of the language.

This approach fits well with a constructivist approach which is premised on the notion that knowledge is 'constructed' on the foundations of a learner's own knowledge framework and where, if we take Piaget's view, conflicting concepts arise, these frameworks are modified or abandoned (Boudourides, 1998). This is an important consideration in the context of this project, since we are dealing here with people who have had a limited exposure to a range of western cultural artefacts as discussed above. So, any opportunity was taken to 'build' on students' current foundations of knowledge through personal experience since veering too far from that foundation would quash the already limited opportunities for learning. It also removed the possibility of not just introducing texts which were foreign to the experience of learners, but ones which could be used and be interpreted as 'instruments of separation, alienation and oppression' (Kadar Asmal, 2001, cited in Auerback, 2004:7). Where concepts proved 'alien', particularly in regards to western numeracy, every attempt was made to make learning experiential, visual and 'real' world – in effect, creating a foundation of knowledge. So, all

CSWE-1 levels used visual aids (such as MAB blocks, 'dots' on paper and measuring tapes) to show numerical values and the results of simple calculations. Higher levels, who already had some foundations in this area, then went onto task-based activities related to the project (quantities and costs).

Generally, for all students, the literacy and numeracy activities for construction comprised repeated cycles of construction tasks or construction 'excursions' (with embedded oral English skills), literacy tasks (such as reading whole texts then devolving to phonics, syllable, spelling activities and simple grammar) and then production. We used video footage and photographs from the 'physical' tasks in order to start from and orally review the oral and visual basis which the students had already experienced.

Once familiar with lexis, higher levels then created or read other texts (recounts and information texts) using the experiences from the construction 'literacy' process. Due to their lack of familiarity with a range of English genres, language structures and lexis there was a focus on structure, grammar and vocabulary (through word shapes and clozes) as well as content (comprehension). They also used highly structured model texts created by the teacher, also due to the lack of English genre awareness, as the basis for creating their own texts (such as descriptions, faxes and take-off sheets).

For lower levels, the written texts not directly related to construction tasks, but related to the project, began with joint oral text creation, reading the whole text and then devolving to phonics, syllable, spelling and grammar tasks ending with the highly scaffolded production of a similar text that varied in some verbs, adjectives and nouns. The structure of this text was repeated in order to enhance sight recognition of common nouns, pronouns and verbs and, hence, build an 'oral language pool ... an essential prerequisite in the move to literacy in L2' (Kalantzis, 1987 in Gunn, 2003:49). There was also some overlap here with higher levels where possible (such as oral text creation, reading information texts and simple descriptions) so there could be joint lessons between all groups.

However, due to the need to meet preliminary competencies in the CSWE-1 course, as well as the lack of foundation skills for the lower levels, at least one session per day was devoted to repetitive preliminary tasks for this group such as graphology, alphabet recognition, alphabetical order, numbers and number recognition, filling in forms and providing basic personal information. Reading social sight signs was achieved within the OH&S component of the construction course, and had been a repetition of previous years.

Scattered through the time table were speaking and listening macro-skill development lessons. These lent themselves well to tasks required for constructing the garden, such as ringing suppliers. Sometimes these were delivered with worksheets (for listening practise skills as well as speaking) but at other times, they were simply boarded up. However, there was always use of realia in speaking tasks, using the two phones at the study centre for students to ring each other. Speaking and listening lessons were also decontextualised in terms of the project such as focusing on personal banking (where distance means a heavy dependence on telephone inquiries and English speaking interlocutors) and people within the project and the community.

That is, phonetics, word recognition, grammar and text as well as the macro skills of speaking and listening were taught largely within the context of the project after doing 'physical activity' or were related to the project and of high interest to the students. Texts were often repeated and gave a sense of progress to students in their ability to recognise words. In addition, delivery was such that disparate levels were separated but joint lessons and joint construction tasks were delivered where possible so that individuals did not feel too 'removed' from the group (even though some still complained of this).



## Results so far

Due to the delivery of two courses concurrently, BIITE and CAT teachers were able to 'bring their tutors' with them which meant there was a higher staff to student ratio. It was noted in the project that this factor, in addition to the higher intensity of teaching hours and the content and authentic task-based nature of the delivery, resulted in improved outcomes in CSWE-1 in terms of skills and knowledge as well as some CSWE-1 competency achievement for students at the higher level. Those who had attended previous collaborative workshops, often retained some of these skills and knowledge. These findings appear to support the 'situated learning' hypothesis of Lave and Wenger (1990) where learning occurs as a function of context, culture and activity. That is, concretising knowledge will improve learning outcomes.

It was also noted, that although some students were reticent to participate (and so didn't achieve as highly as others), most students were highly motivated. This was not only a product of how they enjoyed the construction tasks and the post-literacy and numeracy activities, but how they viewed learning English, often referring to it as 'work' and a 'job'.

Repetition of activities, particularly in terms of preliminary literacy tasks such as learning the alphabet, alphabetical order and writing has resulted in the completion of many competencies for Pre-CSWE-1 participants. However, repetition has to be constant otherwise the knowledge is 'lost'. Child-care and sickness are also influencing the ability of students to succeed in phonetic and alphabetical knowledge, being highly distracted by the children in the class and 'tired' due to hunger and sickness. Hence, there is often a sporadic achievement in literacy tasks. Students are also still having difficulty recognising the placement and shape of letters.

While the higher levels are using phonetic, grammar and structural skills more independently, there is still a heavy reliance on assistance and care has to be taken that there is a lack of over-scaffolding. Without the assistance, or rather presence, there is a lack of independence in learning.

There is generally a lack of recognition among the students that oral activities are part of the learning process and attention wanes severely when oral 'work' is being done in the classroom. There is also a reluctance to 'risk-take' generally, but particularly in terms of speaking. This could be a consequence of cultural factors, both in terms of the need to be 'perfect' before producing something and the fact that there are designated senior spokespeople in the class, and, as such, the younger members will not participate since it is not their 'role' (Sandra Darcy, BIITE lecturer, personal correspondence, 8 May, 2004). For the senior women, however, there is improvement in speaking 'functions', again, if repeated regularly.

The desire for 'perfection' also influences the performance of many students who will 'copy' from those they perceive as being superior in the task. This has resulted in very slow progress for some students, despite constant reinforcement that learning requires making mistakes.

There has been some improvement in phonetic knowledge in the context of texts generated from activities. Some preliterate students can now spell simple three letter words (particularly verbs which are often repeated) and are beginning to recognise diagraphs and simple common words. However, this progress is sporadic and requires constant repetition in order to maintain that knowledge. In addition, this does not necessarily result in transfer of knowledge to alternative texts (although there have been recent noted improvements in this area).

Even though there have been small gains in terms of literacy and numeracy, there have been virtually none for the CADT course, with the exception of 'manual' skills. The

embedded abstract western concepts in the construction competencies and language and numeracy requirements have proven to be way above the skill level of any of the students, all of whom have a restricted lexical and numerate repertoire and theoretical understanding. This is due to the fact, as discussed above, that the students have had a very fragmentary or non-existent education and the social context in which they live.

## Discussion of Results

### The Slow Road to a Utopian VET

It is in this educational malaise that organizations such as CAT and BIITE must deliver 'mainstream' VET packages to students in the same amount of time as 'mainstream' or functionally literate and numerate students who operate in English speaking contexts. When you consider that the core construction competencies actually require a Level 2, 3, 4 or 5 NRS level to complete, it is little wonder that our Utopia garden project has not had the Utopian competency outcomes expected by ANTA (Oldfield, 2002: 163). If you regard the BIITE/CAT group as representative of Utopian literacy and numeracy levels generally, and perhaps equating to those of other remote Indigenous communities, then the forced compliance in our current training milieu to VET national competency standards have even wider repercussions, representing 'an increasing set of barriers' for remote Indigenous community members to engage and succeed in training (Kral and Schwab, 2003: 2).

This has particular pertinence in the Northern Territory whereby the Indigenous population in remote areas has reached a threshold in terms of future sustainability and capacity building enterprises do not appear to result in literacy and numeracy rewards (Kral and Schwab, 2003: 2). Moreover, many have argued that the Training Packages themselves have little relevance in Indigenous contexts where, due to inadequate infrastructure and basic services, the lack of a formal economy, and so the lack of any support for on-the-job requirements, and the failure of primary and secondary education, a set of more generalist skills determined and customised by the community itself and incorporating Indigenous social and cultural practises is eminently more suitable (Arnott, 2003). Indeed, the current centralised Vet system, in its parity treatment of all contexts regardless of the social, cultural and political milieu that influences 'learning effectiveness and outcomes', where managerial concerns take precedence over individual learner's, where management is by officers in large population centres far removed from the contexts and understandings of the third world, non-English speaking and non-academic contexts in which training is funded and the ad hoc nature of the funding itself which preferences one-off short term single projects with 'little on-going support or future (or community) planning', has resulted in a dramatic reduction in educational human and other resources and outcomes in remote areas in the Northern Territory since 1987 (Arnott, 2003: 52, 55). The issue of increasing marginalisation is even more terrifying with the current threat of withdrawing tutorial support for bridging or access courses, the lack of tutorial support for apprentices and loss of funding to Indigenous educational institutions due to the failure to meet certain funding standards as a consequence of the literacy and numeracy levels, the home contexts and demands placed on the clients they service (BIITE, 2004: 8,9).

However, developed as they are 'by industries with little or no experience in Indigenous cultures', the standards imposed by the current national competency VET system is a means by which to privilege hegemonic 'white' normativeness as opposed to the stated claims of equity and access. This 'flies in the face' of stated claims in the 1990s by the Office of Multicultural Affairs of 'the need to maintain, develop and utilise effectively the skills and talents of all Australians, regardless of background' (Campbell, 2000, Hage, 1998: 56, OMA, 1990, cited in Ninnes, 2004: 265). I would argue that an urgent

restructuring of the competency based system and Training Packages are required in order not to further economically and socially marginalise an already heavily discriminated group. This view is shared by many in both CAT and BIITE and in a response to a current Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Senatorial Inquiry, BIITE has argued against the systematic discrimination currently operating within educational provision of trades and CBT (BIITE, 2004: 12).

## The Slow Road to English

One of the major failings of the current Training Package and Competency system is the behaviourist and reductionist approach to learning that underpins competency based training – the empty vessel metaphor whereby the expertise of a trainer in a field and objective truths of the world and positive ontologies are 'inject(ed)' into the novice (Harris et al, 1998: 47). This behaviourist approach embodies the notion of Platonic 'essences' and objective truths, giving rise to the notions that the language required by a student can be deconstructed into its parts and sub-parts and assessed accordingly as well as be determined in terms of its functionality, which in effect is the imposition of a pan-Australian standard to make the student socialised 'according to the values of the dominant socio-economic group' (Auerbach, 1986, cited in Richardson and Rodgers, 2001: 148, Richards and Rodgers, 2001:143,148). Kral and Schwab (2003: 2-3) suggests it also leads to the assumption that the correct methodological approach, such as incorporating Indigenous Learning Styles and inclusive curricula, 'will be the panacea that leads to improved outcomes in education and hence a pathway to further training or employment' (see also Gonczi, 1999: 183). No where is this more obvious than in remote Indigenous communities who are 'subject to the belief that literacy can be learned solely through ... formal schooling' (Schwab and Kral, 2003:2).

However, as practitioners, we know that language and the language learning process, particularly in terms of learning a foreign language with disparate cultural concepts, are far more complex. As Lynch (2003) notes, 'human languages are characterised by a great degree of variability. Languages vary at all levels – phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicon and pragmatics – and at the social level'. A written foreign language acquisition is even more problematic, particularly to preliterate learners, due to the physical, situational, structural differences as well as differences in form between oral and written languages (Gunn et al, 1995). This difficulty is compounded by the extreme linguistic distance between Central Australian Languages generally and English (Collins, 1999:128). Rather than 'buy into' the arguments that the student, their family, their community or the teacher practitioner are in deficit, literature is now also emerging on the importance of social context in terms of language acquisition which seems to support the notions embedded in social constructivist theories.

Research shows that the literacy practices in a particular social context help determine the evolution of a successful 'reader'. Exposure to print, either in the form of books or everyday activities, afford emergent (pre-school) readers with 'an awareness of print, letter naming and phonemic awareness' as well as the 'conventions, purpose and function of print'. Similarly, oral exposure to language prepares the language learner for vocabulary and listening comprehension. Those who enter the schooling system without the same exposure come 'without the understanding (of the link) between their oral language experiences and formal instruction' nor the understanding that there is a 'meaningful interaction with oral and written language' and that printed words convey a message (Gunn et al, 1995).

Due to their social context and lack of schooling, the Utopia students are largely unacquainted with the literacy practices of the dominant culture (nor is their competence in their 'adult vernacular' high, with vernacular languages having only a very recent 'print' history) (Kral and Schwabb, 2003:7). In addition, in the Utopia area, there are few

opportunities for them to practice using English. Students in this project as well as those in other remote localities in needs analysis conducted by the Institute have cited the four major English speaking environments in communities as the school, the store, the health clinic and the council office and communicative interactions in these settings is limited. Since oral English proficiency and vocabulary 'is highly correlated with (or predictive of) English reading', as noted by Slavin and Cheung (2003:21), the oral English deficient context in which the Utopia students find themselves means that there are few opportunities to enhance their oral English skills and so little chance to enhance their proficiency in reading.

Also, there is little print literacy that circulates in the community (if any). For instance, there are no newspapers or libraries and any books are usually stored and used at educational institutions since the students' themselves often live in very substandard overcrowded conditions (the majority live in humpies) and/or are itinerant (moving from one outstation to another outstation or community) and so have no suitable place to store such materials. However, access to such materials is a moot point since the majority have only experienced print literacy behaviours in a formal institutional setting and would not equate a reading or writing print literacy behaviour with an every day activity (with the exception possibly of 'homework'), particularly in lieu of the social pressures in the home environment (see also Kral, 2000).

That is, the 'linguistic ecosystem in which to acquire (English) literacy is impoverished' (Lamb, 2002:46). Consequently, they often perceive their own English language skills, particularly oral skills, as being adequate and more advanced than their actual level and so do not perceive a need to strive for higher levels. They, hence, may fail to seek learning opportunities due to the absence of such motivational factors (Lamb, 2002:47). In addition, due to the lack of employment and infrastructure, there is no apparent evidence in Utopia that Western education generally can result in rewards, outside of acknowledging the need to engage with the structures, institutions and the language of the colonists for the purpose of collective empowerment, 'something to do', providing role models for younger community members or for cultural reasons (such as language maintenance in terms of first language or church activities). Hence, when the students return to their homes, they do not live in conditions where 'language skills can develop' or where skills can be reinforced (Lamb, 2004:35).

Apart from the difficulties inherent in acquiring another language due to the social context in which the students find themselves, the social context and social dynamics also appear to influence the learning behaviour of this group.

Rubin (1975 cited in Lynch, 2003) has identified what constitutes a 'good language learner' as a learner who is willing 'to sound foolish', gives 'attention to form', and monitors one's own and other's speech. However, for the Utopia students, only the most confident and senior are willing 'to sound foolish' since, as discussed, there appears to be less an emphasis on process than ensuring the product is 'perfect'. It is the experience with this group that few students are willing to take risks when it comes to language acquisition and, as mentioned, most students will repeatedly 'copy' written work from those who are acknowledged language intermediaries (due to their second language proficiency skills). For this reason, many will not participate in spoken interactions in particular since such interactions are often fraught with 'errors'. This is particularly so if they hold a less 'senior' position or an alternative role (such as the 'go-getter' and physical 'doer') in the group. It was also noted in this class in particular, not only a high dependency on teacher assistance but a reluctance, and even at times disgruntlement, among learners who were removed from the rest of the class to do higher level work. This dependency and group cohesion appears to lend support to Lamb's (2002:38) arguments that more collectivist 'cultures' may not engender the conditions for the creation of an autonomous, and therefore, in Western terms, successful, language learner – a learner who monitors and manages their own learning.

Thus the autonomy is 'culturally conditioned' and perhaps more reflective of western cultural values that value individual achievement as opposed to 'sociability and cooperation' and identification with a group (Lamb, 2002, p. 38).

There is also the view that social context helps determine what is learnt, and hence, how we construct knowledge. That is, knowledge is created in social environments and the meaning making 'tool' of language is embedded in this social context (Wilmott 1981). As Kral and Schwab note (2003: 4), 'symbolic systems such as language, writing and mathematics have a direct influence on how we think and interact with the world'. However, as discussed, our students do not arrive in the classroom with an already developed sense of 'western' cultural purpose and cultural knowledge of English language use, its categorisations and its embedded meanings, values and 'atomistic' understandings of the world outside of their communities. Nor do they arrive with a pre-ordained western numerical understanding. Rather, they have alternative subjectivities and schemas, language and symbolism informed by their own social and cultural context and according to the social interactions of their group. These disparate cultural 'artefacts' and 'intellectual' tools have shaped their selectivity in terms of assimilated experiences in quite different ways to someone living in Sydney, Brisbane, Perth or even Alice Springs and to put all on a 'level playing field' is absurd (Lerman, 1996:137, Piaget, 1937/1954, Werstch, 1985). This is not to say that there is no cross-cultural fertilisation and intersubjectivity operating here as a consequence of the 'westernisation' and the colonial process, and that there is a large divergence in the group in terms of this acculturation, but rather, the social context does not afford an intimate acquaintance with the 'culture' of the dominant group and it is this that the group must grapple with in order to acquire English (Richardson, 2001:57).

Gonzalez et al (2001) have termed this phenomenon 'conceptual learning' and describe the process as 'learning how native speakers think and use a specific set of social and cultural conventions' such as 'idiomatic expressions, adaptation to audience and content knowledge domain'. They claim learners need to acquire an understanding of the 'conceptual uses of language within a cultural way of thinking' in order to become 'bicultural' and 'bicognitive'. In effect, in terms of teaching English in this context, we are asking this group of remote Indigenous women to become engaged in cognitive dissonance and change their way of thinking, their values, their beliefs and their perceptions in an environment which, needless to say, is often in conflict with those of the dominant group and where these dominant group elements are not apparent. Moreover, this process is fraught with redefinitions of self, 'society' and the 'universe' and entails an acceptance of the 'way a Westerner sees himself in relation to the universe and society' in a social context which is limited in the exposure to these understandings (Shen, 1989 cited in Gonzalez, Chen and Sanchez, 2001).

This process as well as the complexity of languages generally can also partly explain the length of time it takes to acquire English. According to Hakuta, Butler and Witt (2001:9,109), it takes 3-5 years to gain oral proficiency in English language if the student is immersed in an English speaking environment and receives intensive English language instruction. Even so, their levels are still not comparable to native speakers. In the same conditions, it takes 4-7 years to acquire academic English proficiency. However, the client group in this project is not immersed in an English speaking context, nor do they receive intensive instruction, since they are enrolled on a part-time basis. So, if these results were extrapolated to apply to the Utopian group, you would probably see quite a number of additional years to gain oral proficiency and even longer for reading levels that equate to high school levels.

It is for the reasons of the historical educational neglect, the complexity of languages generally, the disparity between the first language and English, the length of time it takes to learn a language and the non-English language and non-Western culture social and cultural context in which the students live, that despite some years of literacy

instruction, many are coming to grips with letter-sound recognition and few can engage in oral English communication in any depth with dominant language speakers. As such, the concept of the Arlparra project, in its concretising of English language, although appearing to provide a way in which students could engage with and accelerate in English language learning and acquire the skills and knowledge embedded in a nationally accredited VET program, has not achieved the Utopian VET ideal. That is, the students are not much nearer to understanding, let alone implementing the western cultural 'artefacts', 'symbols' and 'tools' replete in construction competencies. We can therefore definitively say that embedding literacy and numeracy tasks in CBT national VET packages, even with an additional '100 hours' of literacy and numeracy training, is wholly inadequate in terms of this, and probably other, remote Indigenous groups if we are to expect successful VET competency outcomes. This is particularly so in lieu of the fact that there is insufficient infrastructure and basic services to support training in remote contexts. That is, if we are to retain a VET national competency system, there is a pronounced need for far more additional funding and training support in terms of literacy and numeracy for remote Indigenous community members in addition to increased project planning and support which caters more closely to community needs otherwise we are simply ensuring the continuing cycle of oppression and marginalisation for remote Indigenous people generally.

However, while construction competency completion has been beyond the realms of the project so far, considering the social and cultural context, the lack of formal education by the participants and the lack of intensive English instruction, the project has been in many respects a 'raging' success. Virtually all the students are highly engaged in literacy, numeracy, design and construction activities and highly motivated. Their pre-CSWE-1 and CSWE-1 competency achievement shows the extent to which both the project is facilitating English language learning and a purpose for learning literacy and numeracy in a social context somewhat barren of these opportunities. It is the hope of the project conveners, supervisors and participants that funding bodies recognise these achievements so far and the need generally in remote communities for longer term, integrated and sustainable projects that accommodate the priorities and culture as well as recognise the literacy and numeracy needs of remote communities.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Arnott, Allan (2003) Learning from the past: Implications for effective VET delivery of adult education services in the Northern Territory, *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, vol 43, no 1, pp 43-72.

Auerbach, Elsa (2004) Embedded literacy: a political process with educational character, *Fine Print*, vol 27, no 2, pp 7-11.

Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education (2004) *Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee Inquiry: The effectiveness of education and training programs for Indigenous Australians*, Batchelor, NT.

Boudourides, Moses (1998) Constructivism and education: A shopper's guide, *Conference Proceedings of the International Conference on the Teaching of Mathematics*, Samos, Greece, July 3-6 <<http://thalis.math.upatras.gr/~mboudour/articles/constr.html>>

Campbell, Shirley (2000) The reform agenda for vocational education and training: implications for Indigenous Australians, *CAEPR Discussion Paper* no 202, CAEPR, ANU, Canberra, < [http://eprints.anu.edu.au/archive/00001010/00/2000\\_DP202.pdf](http://eprints.anu.edu.au/archive/00001010/00/2000_DP202.pdf)>.

Cole, Michael and Wertsch, James (n.d.), *Beyond the Individual-Social Antimony in Discussions of Piaget and Vygotsky*, The Virtual Faculty, Massey University, New Zealand, <<http://www.massey.ac.nz/~alock/virtual/colevyg.htm>>

Collins, Bob (1999) *Learning Lessons: An Independent review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory*, Northern Territory Department of Education, Darwin.

Gonzalez, Virginia, Chen, Chia-Yin and Sanchez, Claudia (2001) Cultural Thinking and Discourse Organisation Patterns Influencing Writing Skills in a Chinese English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) Learner, *Bilingual Research Journal*, vol 25, no. 1, <<http://brj.asu.edu/v254/articles/art11.html>>.

Gunn, Barbara, Simmons, Deborah, and Kameenui, Edward (1995) *Emergent Literacy: Synthesis of the Research, Technical Report no 19*, National Center to Improve the Tools of Educators <<http://idea.uoregon.edu/~nicte/documents/techrep/tech19.html>>

Gunn, Margaret (2003) Opportunity for literacy? Preliterate learners in AMEP, *Prospect*, vol 18, no. 2, pp 3-17.

Jordon, Deidre (2002) The notion of two-ways/both ways schooling, *Ngoonjook*, no 22, pp 46-47.

Hage, Ghasson (1998) *White Nations: fantasies of white supremacy in a multicultural society*, Pluto Press, Annandale, NSW.

Hakuta, Kenji, Butler, Yuko Goto and Witt, Daria (2000), How long does it take English Learners to Attain Proficiency, *Policy Report 2000*, The University of California Linguistic Minority Research Institute, California.

Hollingsworth, David (1998) *Race and Racism in Australia*, Social Science Press, Katoomba, NSW.

Harris, Roger, Willis, Peter, Simons, Michelle and Underwood, Fiona (1998), *Learning on the Job: Juggling the message in on-and-off-the-job training*, National Centre for Vocational Education Research, Adelaide.

Kral, Inga (2000) *The socio-historical development of literacy in Arrentre: A case study of writing in an Aboriginal language and the implications for current vernacular literacy practices*, unpublished Masters(Arts), University of Melbourne.

Kral, Inga And Schwab, Jerry (2003), *The Realities of Aboriginal Adult Literacy Acquisition and Practice: Implications for Remote Community Capacity Building*, paper no 257, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, The Australian National University, Canberra < [http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/Publications/DP/2003\\_DP257.pdf](http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/Publications/DP/2003_DP257.pdf)>

Lamb, Martin, (2002) Explaining successful language learning in difficult circumstances, *Prospect*, vol 17, no 2, pp 35-52.

Lave, Jean and Wenger, Etienne (1990), *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge UK.

Lerman, Stephen (1998) A moment in the zoom of a lens: Towards a discursive psychology of mathematics teaching and learning, *Conference Proceedings of 22<sup>nd</sup> conference of the International Group for the Psychology of Education*, (eds) A. Olivier & K. Newstead, International Group for the Psychology of Mathematics Education, Stellensbosch, South Africa.

Lynch, Andrew, 2003, *The Relationship between Second and Heritage Language Acquisition: Notes on Research and Theory Bulding*, *Heritage Language Journal*, vol 1, no 1, < <http://www.international.ucla.edu/lrc/hlj/article.asp?parentid=3615>>

Malik, Kenan (1996) *Meaning of Race: Race, History and Culture in Western Society*, MacMillan, Houndsmills.

Ninnes, Peter (2004), Discourses of Cultural Diversity in the Science Curriculum: Connections, contradictions, and colonialisms, *Discourse: studies in the cultural politics of education*, vol 25, no 2, pp 261-278.

Oldfield, Janine (2002), *Building Literacy and Numeracy for remote-area Aboriginal communities*, book 1, Batchelor Press, Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Education, Batchelor, NT.

Piaget, Jean (1937/1954), *The construction of reality in the child*, translation of *La construction du reel chez l'enfant*, Delachaux aet Niestle, Neuchatal, trans M. Cook, Basic Books, New York.

Richardson, Jack, and Rodgers, Theodore (2001) *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Richardson, Nick ,(2001) *Public Schooling in the Sandover River Region of Central Australia during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century – A critical Historical Survey*, unpublished MA Thesis, Flinders University, SA.

Slavin, Roger, and Cheung, Allan, 2003, Effective Reading Programs for English Language Learners: A Best-Evidence Synthesis, *report no 66*, *Center for Research on Education of Students Placed at Risk*, John Hopkins University, Baltimore  
<http://www.csos.jhu.edu/crespar/techreports/report66.pdf> (accessed 28/6/04).

Slikas Barber, Karen (2002) The writing of and teaching strategies for students from the Horn of Africa', *Prospect*, vol 17, no 2, pp 3-17.



Tuhiwai Smith, Linda (1999), *Decolonising Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Zed Books,/University of Ontago Press, London/Dunedin.

United Nations (2001), 56/116 United Nations Literacy Decade: Education for all, *Proceedings from the 88<sup>th</sup> plenary meeting*, 19 December, <<http://www.unescobkk.org/education/appeal/litdecade/resolution.htm> >.

Wertsch, James (1985) *Vygotsky and the social formation of mind*, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

Wilmott , Eric (1981) *The Culture of Literacy, Aborigines and Schooling* (ed.) Bill Menary, Texts in Humanities, Adelaide, pp 9-19.

## Author's bio-note

Janine Oldfield has been an adult education lecturer at Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Education since 2001. She has special interests in Indigenous Education, literacy and numeracy acquisition and epistemology. <[janine.oldfield@batchelor.edu.au](mailto:janine.oldfield@batchelor.edu.au)>.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the collaboration between Robyn Ellis (the CAT lecturer in the Arlparra Garden Project), Valerie Bainbridge (a co-researcher in the project and supervising lecturer at BIITE who steered me in all the right directions) and Kevin Ronberg (Landcare Officer at Tangentyere Council, Alice Springs who was invaluable in ensuring the Arlparra garden was constructed with maximum efficiency and minimal pain). A special acknowledgement goes to the Utopia ladies involved in the project – Lucky, Katie, Pansy, Amy, Dorothy, Sarah, Audrey, Hazel, Valerie, Queenie, Judy, Lily, Patsy, Nora, Delma, Genevive, Joy, Jeannie and particularly Lena – who without their utter enthusiasm and support, the project would not have occurred at all.