Attending the ACAL conference in Darwin this year was an unexpected surprise – one that pleased me no end. I chose to attend the main conference and then the one-day session on Friday for people interested in LLN and research.

I flew in on the same flights as fellow VALBEC committee member, Rhonda Pelletier, which was fun – we arrived after midnight and when we disembarked we were greeted with a very balmy evening. A bit different to the freezing weather we had left behind in Melbourne. We arrived at the hotel, only to be locked out – Rhonda did attempt to call the night porter, but rang her brother instead, who luckily was still awake. But, he didn’t – or couldn’t - help us out. Eventually the night manager came and showed us in – very comfy accommodation awaited, and next thing I knew, it was morning!

Day one of the conference.

Heather D’Antoine, from the Menzies School of Health Research was the first keynote – and she was the first to admit that literacy is not her area of expertise, but she told her story, interweaving theory with her life and the lives of her family members, tracing their stories back to the time of the first wave of colonialism and the affects that has had on Indigenous families. Hers was a story of strength and resilience and of the power of strong families, and love and education. And that when education is valued in families, then it becomes a value that guides us through the storms.

I spent the rest of the day in sessions that were illuminating and informative. I learnt about Bernie Aquilina’s NSW TAFE funded scholarship action research to Vancouver where she compared and contrasted Adult LLN there to what is happening locally. Pam Osmond from the Reading and Writing Hotline took us through the history of Adult literacy provision from its inception in 1977 to now. The main foyer also had an interactive visual presentation of a timeline outlining different events in the forty-year timespan. Participants could add their own entry point along the way.

Louise Wignall presented the Foundations Skills Capability framework and participants discovered new ways to measure practitioner’s skills and also how to use the tool to understand skills/knowledge gaps within organisations.

Day 2:
Professor Melissa Steyn opened day 2 with her keynote address: Literacy in the time of Decoloniality – a feminist and critical reading of knowledge and how that knowledge and history is affected by colonialism. The idea that applying a frame of decolonialism will allow us to rethink multiple literacies, and problematize the dominant thinking.

I attended a session on graffiti as an anti text, specifically looking at the graffiti inside juvenile justice prison and Dylan Voller as an example. I also attended a workshop on Family Violence in the workplace and NCVER. John Guenther’s address “Applying Red Dirt Thinking’ to adult learning in the NT was inspiring and challenging. The main premise being that the framework through which remote Indigenous communities learning is measured is through a deficit lens rather than learner successes relevant to their culture. I was challenged by the
idea that “Close the Gap’ is an idea that, while it may have come from good intentions, there is the possibility that it isn’t meeting the needs of the people it is supposed to empower because of its strong links to human capital building in areas that do not create meaningful employment. Information about family violence and industrial issues related to that was presented by The Working Women’s Centre in South Australia. The information was well received by an appreciative audience. I know that disclosures of family violence happen in the classroom or corridors of many learning centres, so it was great to have a session dedicated to this topic.
The organising committee really outdid themselves in putting on a wonderful conference and the extra events truly showcased the spectacular surrounds of Darwin. Artist and partner organisation tables at the conference were really well patronised – NCVER, Reading and Writing Hotline and some local Aboriginal artists were represented. The ACAL committee had wonderful T-shirts for purchase in stunning turquoise or red. And I distributed 200 copies of Fine Print, which hopefully will result in a few more subscriptions.
Many if not most of the conference attendees gathered at the Mindl Beach markets on Thursday evening – what a beautiful setting for a market – many families gathered to watch the sunset over the horizon as they picnicked. Our crowd had a VIP marquee and delicious tasting plates from all the food vendors were brought to us in rounds. So yum! A great place to talk to people from the conference and mix it up a bit.
My conference buddy and I also had the pleasure of a tarot card reading from a stall holder – without giving away any secrets…well, it was a very moving experience.
Darwin was a beautiful setting for the ACAL conference – I am sure that the Melbourne organising committee led by the genius of Rhonda Pelletier will do its best to live up to the challenge…watch this space!