# fine print

# valbec

a journal of adult english language and literacy education

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Adult Education in
the Community

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# Editorial

## Reflections on a gift of watermelon pickle…

This issue of *Fine Print* is bursting at the seams! We are luxuriating a little in 2012 being National Year of Reading so expect to read a few extra words of wisdom in this volume.

As I reflect on my own choice to be a reading and writing teacher it was a book of poetry given to me by my parents when I turned thirteen, with the delightful title, *Reflections on a gift of watermelon pickle…,* which prompted me to dedicate my life to words, books and language. Up until then books were stories with characters and a plot, but this book taught me how words as poetry can probe, evoke and describe emotion, which was a revelation, as emotion was about feeling and words were about intellect. A whole new world opened up: I knew words were functional, could tell a story and transfer information, but through metaphor, rhythm and image words could also define feelings, and plumb depths of emotional experience. The two separate worlds of language and emotion became one. I wrote a lot of bad poetry from then on!

A few contributors and VALBEC committee members have described their *ahaa moment!* book(s)—reading they would recommend other teachers dip into. Others rightly commented that they read for pleasure and to escape the rigours of teaching, which is a most worthy reason to read, and would recommend anything that transports you to another world. Yet another has described an underpinning philosophy learnt after seeing his own children enjoy reading. You will find contributor comments at the end of their piece in *A word of advice*, and committee comments in Open Forum.

Lynne Matheson has become our new columnist. Lynne has a lovely *armchair* style, so get that cup of tea, and immerse yourself.

You will love our feature articles. Mary Rhind writes to us from Scotland and her ideas are relevant to our Indigenous Australians and Australians for whom English is a second language. Narrative always interests language teachers and Jennifer Miles discusses how it can assist adult learners. Linno Rhodes breaks new ground and describes how teachers can improve the learning experiences of same sex attracted students. It is great to see a research project take the next step, and that is what Julie Neeson from Southern Grampians Adult Education has written about. I have explored changes in reading and books.

Numeracy practitioners will be pleased with more from Libby Rowswell and a discursive from Chris Tully. We catch up with Jude Newcombe in Beside the Whiteboard. I won't spoil the rest of it for you; turn the page read it for yourself!

Jacinta Agostinelli

# Scottish Gaelic literacy in an English world

*By Mary Rhind*

**In this article on Scottish Gaelic literacy there are parallels to be drawn with Aboriginal literacy here in Australia. Some pertinent questions are: What are the benefits of teaching in the first language medium? How do we sustain or re-invigorate a language? What are the difficulties for learners literate in a second language becoming literate in their first language?**

## Gaelic historically

> I've always believed that the foundation of stable bilingualism is literacy… Unless bilingual Gaelic speakers become literate, the language will remain the prattle of the hearth.
>
> (Norman Maclean, *The Leper's Bell: The Autobiography of a Changeling*, Birlinn 2009)

The Scottish Gaelic language is the Celtic language associated with Scotland. It derives from a Classical Common Gaelic, which was the forerunner also of modern Irish and Manx. It came predominantly with the Scots from Ireland who colonised the area of Argyll during the fifth and sixth centuries, although pre Christian mythology suggests that links between Ireland and Scotland went back much further than that.

The first extant expositions of Scottish Gaelic orthography (as opposed to a Common Classical Gaelic orthography shared by both Ireland and Scotland) are claimed to be the notes written in the 12th century by monks in the margins of the ninth century Book of Deer in Aberdeenshire, which contains parts of the Gospels and the Apostles Creed (written in Latin). Although there continued to be some written Gaelic the language was traditionally and essentially an oral one with songs and poems being passed down through the generations in that mode. After political losses at the beginning of the 17th century, English victors began a process of endeavouring to eliminate Gaelic possibly, mostly, to make it easier for them to rule the Gaels.

In 1709 the Presbyterian Church in Scotland set up schools, ostensibly to educate the people but in effect it marked the beginning of two centuries of efforts to oust the Gaelic language, even though a Gaelic version of the Bible had been published in 1690 by the Presbyterian Minister at Aberfoyle.

Despite continued attempts to the contrary, Gaelic literacy began to gain ground in the mid-nineteenth century due to the same church based education that had finally realised that English could be taught better to the Gaels by doing so through the medium of Gaelic. But the Scottish Education Act of 1872, which made English education compulsory (and made no mention of Gaelic), destroyed the progress that had been made during that century. Some schools with enthusiastic teachers nevertheless taught Gaelic and by the time of the Education Act of 1916, a Gaelic clause was inserted which allowed for the teaching of Gaelic as a subject, (as opposed to the teaching of all subjects through the medium of Gaelic). Indeed most Gaelic was taught through the medium of English. However, slowly but surely things progressed in the first half of the 20th century and by the 1960s a movement towards Gaelic medium education was taking place. This continues with increasing numbers each year.

## Gaelic medium education

The degrading of Gaelic as a language for teaching has reinforced the view that teaching children through the medium of Gaelic in what is now a majority English speaking and operating nation, would be detrimental to children. However, a ground breaking study at Stirling University in 1999 showed that far from being detrimental, children who had come through Gaelic medium education (i.e. all subjects taught in Gaelic) actually performed better in the subject of English in school leaving exams than children who had been taught through the medium of English.

While we are entering a new era where an increasing number of children are coming through the state system learning to read and write Gaelic, this is only a comparatively recent movement and there are many adult Gaelic speakers in Scotland who are unable to read and/or write their native tongue. But they are far from uncultured. Gaelic was traditionally an oral tradition and has a vast bank of *literature* passed down faithfully through the generations through memory alone. Indeed some of the most prolific Gaelic poets were technically illiterate in Gaelic if not in both Gaelic and English.

## Sustaining a language

At the last census in 2001 there were 60,000 Gaelic speakers living in Scotland and of these many live in the Highland area. A Scottish Government initiative in 2002 set up Literacies Partnerships in each local authority area in Scotland to improve the English literacy and the numeracy of the estimated twenty-five per cent of the population whose lives were inhibited because of their low levels of literacy. In addition to addressing this need for support in English speakers, Highland also committed to addressing the need of Scottish Gaelic speakers who had not received tuition in Gaelic at school. With funding from Highland Council and the Scottish Government, the Highland Adult Literacies Partnership engaged one of the partners, Sabhal Mor Ostaig in the Isle of Skye to write a course in Gaelic literacy for Gaelic speakers. This was called *Cuir Peann ri Pàipear* (*Put pen to paper.*)

The current overall situation is that there are now a few Gaelic speakers who have low levels of literacy in English. But there are also many Gaelic speakers who have no literacy at all in their native tongue. Gaelic (like every language) is rooted in social contexts. It has traditionally being the language of the everyday lives of families and communities—used in relationships, social processes and



in people's capacity to create and add to the world, for instance through poetry. But there are complex historical and political issues at work: Gaelic is inextricably linked to people's sense of culture and identity. But without literacy in their first language people can lack confidence in their language and will tend towards the language that they are literate in. This sense of Gaelic being somehow an inferior language is not helped by the many people (both Gaelic and English speaking) who argue that if the Gael today speaks and understands English (as most now do to a greater or lesser extent), why are we pouring vast resources into maintaining what is potentially a dying language?

However, the counter argument is that over the centuries an unquantifiable amount of money has been injected into English education and literacy in Scotland to the impoverishment of Gaelic and there has therefore been a surge of Government resources into the language since the 1960s. The aim is to rebuild a large enough base of literate Gaelic speakers to sustain the language. Not an easy task in a country where the predominant language, of business and commerce as well as of leisure and recreation, is English. And even in the efforts to revive the Gaelic language, adult native Gaelic speakers have been largely bypassed as much of the concerted effort is aimed particularly at children and learners of the language.

However, we were aware that some Gaelic speakers, particularly older people, were often isolated and marginalised from other Gaelic speakers both geo-graphically and demographically. The use of computer technology could allow them to communicate by email with other Gaelic speakers as long as they had literacy. And as far as the revitalisation of the Gaelic language

goes, the vast number of Gaelic speakers with a rich eloquence in their language is largely untapped as a resource to promote, enrich and, indeed, teach children and new learners to the language, because of their lack of skills in reading and writing in their native tongue, and consequently because of their lack of confidence.

## Gaelic literacy course

The literacy course *Cuir Peann ri Pàipear* that was devised for Gaelic speakers was very different from a course for Gaelic learners who were learning a new language. The Gaelic speakers had the language in full measure, but just not the ability to read and write in it. Nor are people learning the mechanics of literacy from scratch because they are already literate in English to a greater or lesser degree. So the challenges for adults coming to this for the first time are not just about learning something new but about having to unlearn some of the English literacy they already have.

There are probably three main areas where native Gaelic speakers have particular difficulty with Gaelic literacy.

The first is spelling, which operates totally differently from English. The Gaelic language has only eighteen letters in the alphabet—no j.k.v,x,w,y,z,q—and yet Gaelic has all the language sounds which these letters represent in English, and more, think *loch*. So, for instance, a *v* sound can be reproduced by either an *mh* or a *bh*. Also a *th* or an *sh* in Gaelic gives you an *h* sound as in *holly*, but if you want to represent the English *sh* sound in Gaelic you need to use a single *s* followed by an *i* or an *e*. It was not until the 1960s and the rise of Gaelic medium education that a standardisation of spelling and orthography was developed to enable the marking of school exam papers and this has regularised Gaelic spelling—and I am one myself who has had to learn to spell in this new fashion, known as GOC, standing for Gaelic Orthographic Convention.

The second major difficulty is that because there has been little Gaelic medium education, Gaelic speakers do not have Gaelic words for things like parts of speech, so there is a whole new vocabulary to describe these things. (Note that even the acronym in the paragraph above is in English.)

And thirdly Gaelic makes a lot of use of the apostrophe— far more than English—and it often appears when initial letters are lenited/aspirated. So for instance you say *am*

*baile* (the town), but *anns a' bhaile* (in the town). The letter *h,* while it features in Gaelic orthography, is not a full letter that can stand alone but used only to denote lenition/ aspiration which results from grammatical influences— e.g. an apostrophe is often used when the feminine article is used (before certain letters) so *the candle* which is feminine is *a' choinneal*, though a masculine noun is *an cat* (the cat). This makes it more difficult to look up a dictionary because you have to be aware of ignoring the *h* in order to find a word in the dictionary.

If Gaelic is to succeed as a language in the 21st century, it needs to be able to be used in all parts of life and because it has been under resourced in the past, there is still a vast infrastructure to be built. For instance even Gaelic websites are in English reinforcing the assumption that Gaels will want to (or will only be able to) browse in English. And the disappointing thing is that there is some truth in this—because Gaelic literacy skills tend to be lower, even where people have them, people find it more difficult to skim text in Gaelic. There are still Gaelic speaking parents who encourage their children to become English speaking as they believe that that is the way they will have better employment prospects. And so, most of all, Gaelic needs to be able to be used for economic development. It needs to be used in business and government as well as in daily and family life. It needs to be seen as a gateway to employment and up-market jobs and not as a hindrance to employment or jobs. And if this is to happen, then Gaelic speakers need to be fully literate so that they can contribute to the modern Scotland and the world from the strength of their rich and enriching culture.

## Case Study

Catriona is a woman in her mid thirties who was born and brought up on the Isle of Skye. Gaelic was the language of the home but the language of the primary school was English. Catriona received no Gaelic reading or writing at school but learned to read Gaelic, to a certain extent, by herself through use of the Bible, which she heard regularly.

Gaelic remains the language she is most comfortable in and the one she uses in a crisis but she is fluent and fully literate in English and has become more so since moving away from the west coast to the east.

Catriona knew I was involved in delivering English literacy and asked if there was anywhere that she could **Continued on page 17 ...**

# Restor(y)ing lives

*By Jennifer Miles*

**The theme of this article is about the stories of life, and it is about the telling of these stories as a potential new beginning for adults returning to study.**

Many stories, told by diverse individuals in all manner of contexts, have been shared with me over many years. Recently, through the course of undertaking my masters research, I have realised that story—narrative/autobiographical reflection—is a natural starting point towards developing as a critical thinker. Through telling our stories, an emerging awareness of the impact of our experiences allows us to more clearly place ourselves into the larger scheme of our lives. We can then consider how we might ultimately be able to *re-story* our lives and create a previously unimagined future that builds on the authentic aspects of our past, and fully realises our potential.

## How stories came to matter

In the word question there is a beautiful word quest. I love that word. We are all partners in the quest.

The essential questions have no answers. You are my question, and I am yours—and then there is dialogue. The moment we have answers, there is no dialogue. Questions unite people, answers divide them. So why have answers when we can live without them. (Elie Wiesel interview with Oprah, http://www.oprah.com/omagazine/Oprah-Interviews-Elie-Wiesel/7)

My understanding of the transformative power of narrative has emerged over the years through various environments where attending to the psychosocial needs of others has been paramount. My own life experiences have included hairdresser, carer of elders and adults living with intellectual impairments, fitness instructor, personal trainer, and most importantly, mother. Within each of these contexts I have become keenly aware of the need to nurture and seed creative, authentic self-expression—telling stories of life and living—for optimal growth and development.

I now work in professional development across a range of technical and further education (TAFE) colleges and within the ACE sector. People within these environments are returning to or continuing their studies, and I hear many stories of expressed fear as they contemplate entry/re-entry into the unknown and unfamiliar environment of adult learning. Some speak of discouraging early educational experiences and relate a degree of pessimism regarding their perceived ability to successfully navigate further education. For others, limited self-awareness related to the impact of life influences seems to produce a general reluctance to engage proactively with further learning—to look beyond the bounds of current situations, and the possibilities that exist outside of what is known. Often the absence of family and social support is identified as a barrier to potential success as individuals tentatively step out on a new learning pathway.

As a result of having recognised the rich benefits of reflecting on one's story over these last years, I now include autobiographical reflection, or narrative, as a tool in the learning process. I provide a space for adult learners to reflect on their own stories of life and learning. The stories told and shared by them identify the place of self-recognition individuals arrive at, and illustrate how examining their lives can enable a change in perspective through the preliminary identification and acknowledgement of previously unrecognised and unchallenged life views.

I recognise that my ultimate aim as an educator is to promote understanding and optimal responsiveness to the ever-present challenge of engaging individuals in the transformative journey of learning, and I have found that through including story in learning programs, my learners are provided with the opportunity to reflect on their own path to becoming. The opportunities provided over the years to examine the story of my own learning have caused me to question the creation of my sense of self, and have enabled me to identify the impact of ruling ideologies and social structures on my agency—the impact of external authority on me. (The question over the primacy of either structure or agency in human behaviour is a central debate in the social sciences. In this context, *agency* refers to the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices. *Structure*, by contrast, refers

to the recurrent patterned arrangements that influence or limit the choices and opportunities available. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Structure_and_agency) As I have come through my own personal tribulation and ultimate revelation through reflecting on my learning career, I now support others on their own journey of personal discovery and transformation.

## The questions

My purpose in undertaking research was to examine the validity of these findings, to determine if others working with adult learners returning to study within the VET sector had experienced and documented similar outcomes related to the use of narrative, utilising a Transformative Learning theoretical framework. Vocational education and training is not traditionally or currently designed or recognised for its transformative role and potential. In the work-dominated discourse of VET policy and practice, it is commonly and officially assumed that vocational education and training, as the name suggests, is directed towards preparation for work or developing skills for employment. So within the domain of VET, and focussing on these adult learners returning to study, my aim was to uncover knowledge around the following questions:

- In what ways can telling and reflecting on their stories provide adult learners returning to study with a greater knowledge of self that may foster a richer engagement in the learning process, build learner self-identity and potentially promote more beneficial learning and vocational outcomes?
- How might any transformations in the perspectives of adult learners returning to study extend beyond the individual to their immediate environment and society?
- What are the potential implications of these findings for pedagogical practice and curriculum design within the VET sector?

## The storytellers

My plan in undertaking the research was to locate adult learners, those newly returned to study, and to invite them to engage in the reflective process of storytelling as part of their reintroduction to learning. Numerous unanticipated circumstances delayed selection, and the final outcome was access to students who were already in the second year of their diploma studies.

**Kate:** A deeply reflective woman, fifty years of age, whose life experiences to this point have afforded challenging but rich opportunities for her growth. Currently enrolled in a Diploma of Liberal Arts, she expressed interest in involving herself in my research as an opportunity to engage with a potentially interesting life experience. She didn't express any particular expectation, and was happy just to be involved in the reflective process associated with participation.

**Annie:** Bright, full of energy and joie de vivre, her twenty years have seen her nurtured by a predominantly female environment in the absence of her father through most of those years. Enrolled in the Diploma of Liberal Arts, and currently in the process of responding to an identified restlessness, she keenly expressed interest in being involved in the study to take advantage of the opportunity to address this emerging recognition of the need for change in her life. Spirited and joyful, she approached the task as I imagine she does most things in life, with admirable and energising honesty and openness.

**Sara:** An intensely reflective and emotionally intelligent young woman, Sara expressed an enthusiasm for the opportunity to reflect more deeply on her motivation and direction in life. Enrolled in the Diploma of Liberal Arts, and contemplating enrolment at NIDA or another of the academies for the study of dramatic arts, she is an emerging actor and producer and saw participation in the study as a potentially rich learning opportunity to complement her developing skills and knowledge.

**Penn:** Nineteen years of age and my *poet laureate*, tells of being a product of a deeply loving and nurturing extended family, whose rich engagement saw him joining to only a limited extent in the company and recreational pursuits of his early school friends. Initially enrolled at a state primary school, he speaks of coming to a Christian school where the anonymity and lack of personal attention of the state system were left far behind, and where he felt free to explore his interests and strengths with encouraging support. Also enrolled in the Diploma of Liberal Arts and contemplating a career in teaching.

**Zac:** An intriguing young man, whose intelligent and inquiring mind has fostered a keen interest and grounded knowledge in the practical and scientific world around him. Full of bravado, and with strongly articulated opinions of the world before him, he has yet to engage with an environment that provides the space to critically reflect on his assumptions about life and living. Initially enrolled in a VCAL Certificate II in Hairdressing, he

left the course and school prior to completion of Year 11 and has been employed in a job that he identified as providing limited opportunities to stretch his always present curiosity and knowing of potentially greater personal accomplishments. In hearing about the research study through a peripheral contact, he expressed interest in participating as a possible means of clarifying how he might move forward personally and professionally.

I was also deeply situated as a learner on a discovery tour within this research. My story formed the foundation of my research study—it initiated, informed and continues to direct the process of the inquiry, and was brought to the table of the interviews with my storytellers so that we could share the joys and the turbulence of the path to our knowing and becoming.

## The method

Data collection included individual interviews, followed by a focus group where participants were invited to share the experience of reflecting on their own learning history. The questions and tools used to guide the process, including the introductory class session, were framed around the aim of inviting individuals to reflect on various circumstances of their lives that contained stories of learning, and to gradually introduce questions that invited deeper reflection on the underpinning premise of their expressed knowing. The ninety-minute individual interviews were conducted in locations identified by the participants as uniquely comfortable to each of them.

The participants were invited to share the reflective process each had undertaken in the lead-up to the interview, and to discuss the method they had chosen to record these reflections. Utilising a narrative methodology, they were encouraged to express their story in a way that was meaningful to them, and questions that drew out potential evidence of the ten phases of transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000) were included where needed to guide reflections. (See Figure 1)

Self-determination and freedom of expression was explicitly highlighted to each individual as we approached the interview, to give them permission to explore anything that came to mind that they considered relevant to their learning story, and to promote a stream-of-consciousness participation in the reflective exercise. Their right to exclude anything, or to cease the interview at any point was also strongly articulated and reinforced both prior to commencement and throughout the sessions. At this

interview and the later focus group, we reflected on the ways in which the autobiographical process had fostered the unfolding of stories and understanding, and influenced the perspectives and learning of each participant. The opportunity was also provided to reflect on changes of attitude or behaviour, in response to any recognised perspective transformation achieved through the process.

## Time and space for reflection

I've become a fan of the Greek notion of time. They have two words … *chronos* and *kairos* … that highlight the difference between deadlines, appointments, work structures and key performance indicators (*chronos*), and the magic and honouring place where time seems to stand still while we languish in the joy of being (*kairos*). This notion was highlighted and encouraged as my participants immersed themselves in the storytelling process and fostered a rich dynamic that enabled the continued exploration of ideas. Each participant came to the interview with their unique motivation and approach to the task at hand, and each story of life and learning took different paths, weaving its way through the exploration of the people and environments of each of their lives.

## Inspirations and stories already told

Related to my own emerging knowledge and understanding, Brookfield (2005), Mezirow (2000), Freire (1972), Frankl (1964) and others stirred me to draw on the political and social dimensions of meaning-making, identifying the power of critical reflection in the transformative learning process. This inquiry catalysed a continued critique of the power relationships and hegemonic assumptions that had existed within my immediate and larger environment, and years of un-named *knowing* began to fall into place … to emerge with a recognisable identity.

## Narrative and autobiographical reflection

According to Brady, narrative is about going back to the beginning and examining the course of life. In *Redeemed from time—learning through autobiography* (Brady, 1990) he speaks about autobiography as originating in *bios*—the course of life—and proposes that in reflecting on this life we have three aspects of self on which to focus:
- *the remembered self*—recalling the scraps that slowly link together to form the story
- *the ordered self*—finding a way of making sense; meaning making that enables the construction of a

foundation on which a new future, or, a new story, can be built

- *the imagined self*—the dreaming, the possibilities, the creation of the yet to be told

Brady sees the *remembered self* as the drawing of a self-portrait with words … storytelling: memories and the interrelationship between past events and the memories of these events—a second reading of the human experience. The *ordered self* refers to an aerial view of one's life. Brady suggests that without memory we lose our history and our past. Through remembering, human life is given shape that extends back into the past and forward into the future. The *imagined self,* Brady suggests, emerges through the act of reflecting on one's life.

> One goes from year to year gradually getting the disorder of one's mind in order and this is the real impulse to create. Until one has expressed a thing it is like an untidy, unswept, undusted corner of a room. (William Butler Yeats ,1955).

Yeats' insights complement Brady's thoughts on remembering. He alludes to the names and faces that may be forgotten, but suggests that the creative spirit recalls the ideas and truths that lay behind and within them. What was unremembered was invented and reflected his deeper perceived realities—it wasn't necessarily what happened, but *his memory* of what happened. Yeats called this his memory for eternal things and proposed that every autobiography is a work of art and a work of enlightenment.

## Transformative learning journey

Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 2000) asserts that from a disorienting dilemma in life—an event that throws us off the known and familiar course of our existence and knowing to that point—a process of self-examination emerges, that causes the questioning of long held values, behaviours and world views. From this new questioning standpoint, a growing discontent and alienation can emerge from what have been the traditionally accepted social norms and structures. A greater critical awareness of others, both within and outside of the individual's morphing view of the world ensues, that critiques previously accepted social roles and expectations, and the habitual ways in which these assumed roles have been enacted. A choice is necessary at this point—one that not all are willing to make—to allow ourselves to stretch into the possibility of who we might become, or to return instead to the known territory of our previous and familiar existence. This critically reflective passage seems ultimately to bring about a reassessment, a renewed recognition or a completely transformed understanding of our ability to engage with and influence the differently perceived world, viewed through the lens of this new perspective. This examination of the subjective experience challenges the previously perceived relationship and interaction between the individual's agency and external structures, and can lead to a newly constructed sense of authorship and influence in our life. This transformative process is framed by Mezirow. (See Figure 1.)

Brookfield (Brookfield, 2001) supports Mezirow's assertion that critical reflection can be part of the transformative process, but proposes that without examining the power relationships and hegemonic assumptions that exist in one's immediate and larger environment, transformation is unlikely to take place. He sees that transformation requires the critically reflective

### Figure 1

1. a disorienting dilemma—loss of job, divorce, marriage, back to school, or moving to a new culture
2. self-examination of feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame
3. a critical assessment of assumptions
4. recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared
5. exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions
6. planning a course of action
7. acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
8. provisional trying of new roles
9. building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10. a reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective

process to be politicised in order to identify the impact of ruling classes and social structures on human agency. Brookfield suggests that transformative learning occurs when what was once was seen to be permanent and stable is recognised by the individual as being relative and situation specific, and often shaped to accommodate the needs and interests of ruling others.

## New perspectives emerge

Transformative learning as autobiography claims that the learner composes their life by using imagination and critical reflection to gain insight and understanding around the circumstances of their becoming and as each participant immersed themselves in the writing, the drawing and the telling, threads of stories emerged that flowed freely into associated memories woven together meaningfully to affirm known truths, and highlight previously unconnected, or perhaps unexpressed knowing. Questioning and deeply critical reflections arose naturally and fluidly from each participant as they became increasingly absorbed by the process of re-storying their lives, re-examining and re-membering the learning in all that had gone before, within the cultural and social contexts and confines of the time.

Ultimately, stories found their way to a point that promotes an imagery of standing at a gateway, where what has gone before can be seen, acknowledged and potentially reconciled, and what lies ahead can begin to be imagined and anticipated.

## Moving towards new stories

In our final meeting, I invited the participants to reflect on any changed perspectives on life identified since our individual interviews—new knowledge of self uncovered, possibilities previously unconsidered, barriers identified—anything related to the life and learning reflection they had undertaken as part of the storytelling process.

Annie commented that she wanted more answers, less questions, more action as she moves forward:

> The fundamentals haven't changed but I think there will be different people in my life … it will be better too. Different for the better, hard to articulate … not just being along for the ride in my life … I'm going to start making my own choices, and make something of myself … Things I didn't think I could do, well why can't I? … I think that's really helpful as I might not have done it otherwise.

Penn identified personal barriers to his moving forward:

> I suppose I tend to think of everything in terms of looking back, because I used to be quite a shy person … I realised that not doing things is not worth it … I want to be able to talk about it later … want to be able to say you did the awesome thing, the brave thing, like you walked across the coals. It might hurt like hell, but later you can go, 'I walked right across a bed of coals and it was brilliant … See these scars?' That's how I think about things that I do, I want to look back on it and think 'God, you were awesome!'

And Sara's vision for her future?

> … one of my biggest fears is time … I'm scared if I don't do everything now I will live with the regret of not doing it, that's why I go insane and do everything. So I think it was more after I spoke with you … it was building on what I spoke about … I want to be able to earn a living from what I love … If my vision on the future has changed in that little way, I think I'm ready to commit more because I know how much I want to do it.

Zac spoke of his plans to enrol in a university course in 2011 that would lead him into what he named broadly as politics. My hope is that through having undertaken the reflective process, and now stepping out onto this new learning pathway, he will find the stimulation and interest he seeks that will allow his bright new future to unfold.

In my final discussion with Kate, she articulated that undertaking the storytelling had stirred her thinking, and she had been surprised by how powerfully looking back at the past had impacted on her. She identified that she now has insight into why she responds to certain situations in the way that she does, and that it has been beneficial for her to have clarified this understanding.

The transformative journey, as Taylor has indicated, can be an arduous, and often drawn out affair, where new epistemological frameworks take time to percolate and gain clarity (Taylor, 2007). He speaks of '… developing a sense of trust in the process of transformative learning, allowing for students to live with some discomfort while on the edge of knowing, in the process of gaining new insights and understandings.' Nelson (1994) speaks of

discovering authorship of one's life, and that relative to the capacity we have to imagine how else life might be, there develops a buoyant sense of personal authority. He refers to critical internal and external factors that can often act as catalysts to a previously unimagined future, and of this moment of change ' … the instrument of transformation …trouble that leads to crisis … if this disruption to order is unable to be accommodated within the existing social structure, there may arise the legitimation of a new order …' (Nelson, 1994).

As choices and deeply rooted changes in behaviour and enacted personal authority came into play for each of my participants, an altered sense of self emerged that holds promise for progression beyond self-identified barriers. Each of my participants has articulated an awakening sense of possibility of how they might now step forward, and have expressed a sense of freedom in choosing to claim and enact a more personally authentic and self-authored life.

## Closing thoughts

My research journey has confirmed that stories have the power to heal fractured aspects of self. Stories transform learning and lives. Stories matter.

Whilst acknowledging its limitations, I would argue that the study has nonetheless provided strong indications of the benefits of providing space for individuals to reflect deeply on the learning of their lives, where they have the chance to uncover and *unlearn*—to deconstruct inauthentic constructions of self, and to build new compositions of capability and potential. The brief opportunities provided to lay open the depths of their memories through the telling of their stories is limited in its capacity to achieve a totally transformed perspective for these learners, but it is a springboard to another level of understanding. My storytellers are on the edge of their own knowing, along the continuum of the ever-morphing path of becoming.

**Jennifer K Miles is an educator, researcher and writer, passionate about storytelling and its power to change perspectives of self. She works in professional learning and development at a Victorian TAFE institute with**

adult learners, supporting them as they draw forth stories of strength and potential gained in their lives and move towards the creation of their stories as yet untold.

## A word of advice

Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the oppressed* has to be my primary text. Viktor Frankl's *Man's search for meaning* as it explores meaning making in suffering. If we can allocate meaning to suffering, we can endure anything. For example, if I can see a way out of my current (less than ideal) situation through undertaking/enduring a personally challenging course of study, I can overcome what has held me back until now (low literacy, socio-economic constraints).

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# The writing on the wall

*By Jacinta Agostinelli*

**Reading—the beginning of the end or a new chapter? In this article Jacinta Agostinelli probes the questions we are asking about reading, and re-assures us that reading is a neverending story.**

When television was a new phenomenon in Melbourne in the mid to late 1950s, not everyone could afford to buy one, certainly not our family with its loads of kids and my father on a teacher's wage. But our next-door neighbours had one; in fact they were probably the only family in the street who owned one. My mother tells a story about how on most Saturday nights our neighbours used to hold a television night and invite my parents and a few other neighbours in to watch TV. They used to set the kitchen chairs up in the lounge room in rows as though they were at a picture theatre. That's how they watched it, peering behind the head in front of them to see. It seems funny now she says, but at the time I suppose we thought watching television was like going to the pictures so we copied the seating arrangement too. It didn't occur to us that there was any other way of doing it. We used to love going to the pictures and because television was new we weren't sure how to *do* it.

In some ways this story illustrates where we are now with reading. We are so used to the written word, the written story, being presented to us in hard copy that it is taking us a while to imagine how else it could be. The digital world is expanding exponentially and yet we are a little afraid of exploiting its potential in relation to the activity of reading. E-books are around but at the moment they don't seem to be more than a book in digital form, not that different to a book really. Web pages seem to be more embracing of what technology has to offer—sound, image, interactivity, flexibility, colour—and yet we do not consider reading web pages as *reading that matters*. There are blogs, social medias, facebook walls, but again not generally considered to be rich, transformational reading experiences. When it comes to transferring and transporting knowledge, new and old technologies have conquered both time and distance, but how will they influence and transform the activity that is *reading*? Will reading and books be things of the past? We sit between the past and the future, afraid of what we might lose, not sure how to control the future, and ask these questions with fear and trepidation.

While these questions are not new, they are big, and will only grow bigger during this year that we have dedicated to reading, 2012 National Year of Reading. Without time or space to do more, I will settle for probing the questions themselves and hopefully give readers some words to chew on.

## What is reading?

Great Britain dedicated 2008 as the National Year of Reading and started a campaign to become a nation of readers. An evaluation of the successes of the campaign is contained in a report, Reading the Future, by consultant Andrew Thomson. This report recommends adopting a broad definition of reading:

> …reading can be anywhere, for anyone and through a vast array of possible media. Reading is not only about books. It is certainly not just about aspiring to read classic works of literature. (p. 6)

> Defining reading in terms of the widest variety of resources/materials and in terms of its purposes for pleasure, enrichment and literacy is an important first step. (p. 42)

The messages here are that *all* reading matters, and what is important is that people read more. The argument is that once people read more, it follows that they will become better readers and they will naturally broaden the content of what they read. After the Year of Reading in 2008, the British Government developed a framework around these definitions of reading in order to continue the successes of the campaign and to respond to data gathered from research during the year.

## Why does reading matter?

In-depth research was a key component of the British campaign. It will be no surprise to educators that the overarching conclusion drawn from the research was that 'Reading changes life chances' (Reading the Future, 2008); it is good to have sustained statistical and qualitative evidence showing the connection between

reading and success in life and work. Further to that, and again no surprise, was evidence showing that, 'Literacy is a lever for social justice and mobility and so has an impact on educational attainment, narrowing the gap between the rich and the poor, stronger communities, health and wellbeing, skills and employment, reducing crime and recidivism.' (Reading the Future, 2008) Statistics contained in the report state that sixty-three percent of men and seventy-five percent of women with low literacy have never received a promotion. So reading matters because it can improve lives.

Aside from these predictable outcomes, the upshot of the research was the discovery that reading matters to different groups of people for different reasons. When encouraging people to read more, this becomes a very important discovery. The British data showed for example, that different promotional methods needed to be employed when encouraging reading among lower-socio economic groups, than when say, encouraging reading among Asian women. This is because the former group expect reading to improve their life and work chances, and the latter group read for romantic content. The British found that during their campaign, the focus shifted from the providers of reading to the readers themselves.

An Australian study in 2009 by the Centre for Youth Literature, Keeping Young Australians Reading, points to a strong connection between reading for pleasure and positive and lifelong social and educational wellbeing. The belief is that reading for pleasure humanises people; when reading a story a person enters the lives of others, and can experience, at least imaginatively, how it is to be someone else. Paul Jennings writes:

> Children who don't like books are deprived of one of our most powerful humanising influences. You can't beat up an old lady on the train if you have been into her life or someone like her in a story. You can't push a boatload of refugees out into the sea to drown if you survived the terrors of the torture chamber and the unforgiving ocean as a fellow-traveller—in a book…(sighted in Keeping Young Australians Reading, 2009)

Reading, particularly reading for pleasure, matters because it allows us to empathise with others, appreciate diversity and difference, and understand other cultures. Reading is *good* for us and for our communities.



## How does reading work?

What is at work when we read? What is it about reading that improves lives and prevents us from pushing the boat of refugees back out to sea? It isn't the mechanical act of decoding letters and complying with the syntax, stopping at the full stops and so on. My belief is that it is the meaning and content that is transferred when we read, that matters. A follower of systemic functional linguistics from way back, I understand that we make meaning when reading a text by combining our knowledge of syntax, semantics and context, but it is the overall meaning that we take from the text that matters. It is this which humanises us, which instills us with empathy and allows us cultural understanding, in short, which keeps us from killing each other.

In the Keeping Young Australians Reading report I found this quote:

> There is a definite shift in thinking about books as content rather than format. This will be increasingly important with e-books (born digital) and digitisation of hard-copy books for online consumption… (p. 35)

If it is the content that is significant, why not do away with reading altogether? We can watch movies, go to galleries, visit graffiti walls, sit in lectures; these activities are easy to engage in, less solitary and preferred by young people. In this technological era, rather than dismiss these other content rich activities, we need to explore their attraction.

It may be however, that reading offers us more than content. I believe reading teaches us also how to use language. Verbal communication teaches us how to use language as well, but reading enables us to become

articulate and extends the ways and means in which we express ideas. The activity of reading, in particular reading for pleasure, develops vocabulary and thought, so enabling us to give and receive information at a more complex level than can be achieved solely through daily communication. Research shows that people who can articulate thought and ideas well tend to have better life and work outcomes. Language is power.

So, I have come to the conclusion there are two things that matter when we read: the first is that when we read we are consuming content (ideas, culture, understanding); and the second is that when we read we are absorbing how to construct and express thought, understandings and ideas. It follows then that reading and wellbeing are interdependent, and therefore reading is necessarily dynamic, evolving and changing just as the social environment in which it is placed evolves and changes. Being a social activity, reading must change to reflect changes in social context.

Returning to my story at the beginning of this long train of thought, we soon realised, my mother says, that we could sit in comfy couches and chairs around the TV, rather than on kitchen chairs in rows. Likewise it is inevitable that we will realise the potential of technology to transform the activity of reading. Len Unsworth, Head of School and Professor of English and Literacies Education at the University of New England, says:

> We need to think of different elements. In the film business, they pay a lot of attention to the music track. When we think about books in the future we will need to think about language, image, music, sound. It is more and more an e-world. People will want to insert a soundtrack and make composite electronic texts. I think what schooling needs to do is to be aware of the culture of blending these things.
>
> For authors, readers become part of the story-making. I think it is a very exciting place to be. We will be in a much better position to re-engage kids who are disengaged. (Keeping Young Australians Reading, p. 36)

It is inevitable too that we will re-define what it means to read to include and embrace what new technologies have to offer.

## Asking the right questions

When we ask the questions I asked in the second paragraph, how will technology transform the activity of reading, and is reading a thing of the past? I wonder if in fact these are the right questions to be asking. I think we need to consider, with the expansion of technology and new medias, what is it about reading that we are afraid of losing? When we stop to consider what it is about reading that matters, it is the content (messages about life, how to live it, culture, other lives etc), and the lessons on language construction. New technologies will not threaten these, and in fact we can use new technologies to their advantage. Life and culture are dynamic and reading which is so interwoven with life and culture is dynamic too; we are currently experiencing that dynamic and do not quite know how it will be *done* in the future.

New technologies and reading need not be seen as a dichotomy but rather as belonging to and needing each other. Put this way the future becomes a source of excitement, not a thing to fear.

**Jacinta Agostinelli is the editor of Fine Print.**

## PS

Readers will be happy to know that my mother still enjoys a trip to the pictures where she sits happily in the rows provided and has no intention of re-arranging the furniture any time soon.

## A word of advice

As a developing literacy teacher I loved any book that analysed language and text, and although I came more recently to David Rose's *Learning to read, reading to learn,* (a scaffolded approach to teaching literacy), I was still very interested in his framework and enjoyed applying it to my teaching. Rose may have been over ambitious and too definitive in trying to develop a system that would *work* for everyone, but I still appreciated his use of meta-language and his language and text analysis. After studying *Reading to learn, learning to read*, I truly understood the meaning and benefit of scaffolding.

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# When being the same means being different

*By Linno Rhodes*

**Have you ever wondered how your classroom and your teaching might seem to students who are same-sex attracted? You may have inadvertently excluded them simply through your choice of words and texts. Linno Rhodes discusses the discrimination experienced by same-sex attracted students and some simple but significant ways teachers can address it.**

I have worked in adult literacy at various ACE centres, TAFE and the Centre for Adult Education over the last nine years, and the number of gay students appearing in my classes has been low, and that includes adjusting for those who chose not to identify themselves as gay. This has led me to wonder about what happens to the gay kids who left school early due to homophobic bullying. It has also prompted me to reflect on how adult education teachers can redress the bias and discrimination same-sex attracted adults in their classes may have experienced in previous educational settings.

I am going to discuss a few of the ways I have thought about addressing these complexities and for the ease of reading I will use the term *same-sex attracted* to mean those of us who identify as gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, intersex and/or queer.

## Privacy first

I will begin by saying that we need to provide a safe and supportive environment but this can be difficult terrain. Privacy must, and should be a consideration; some same-sex attracted students may not be comfortable discussing *gay* issues due to the perceived or real homophobia of others around them, and may not want to be identified.

## Inclusive language

I have tried a number of support strategies and have found that by far the most successful way is to embed inclusive language into activities and class sessions. This sends a powerful, yet understated, message to all students because it normalises same-sex relationships and may act to invite all students to be inclusive with their language as well.

For example, teacher generated activities can be inclusive by making the two people who do the shopping in the activity the same gender. The ambiguity here can be read as inclusive; it may give some students something to think about, while not registering any thought in others. Even so, same-sex attracted and heterosexual students

hear the teacher's support and acknowledgement, which creates an environment where others can also acknowledge sexuality. Another idea is to change the gender non-specific *my partner* into *my partner Wayne*, (or Maya).

At one point I suggested students bring newspapers to class to investigate issues of concern in their own communities. This allowed one young woman to bring in a newspaper aimed at a gay readership, and to work on an issue of personal relevance to her. Others in the class were interested and it provided a good forum for many discussions.

Many same sex attracted students do not feel safe to *come out*. All literacy teachers will know that safety is an integral part of the adult literacy classroom; people who have been ostracized and lived with the stigma of literacy issues need the classroom to be a safe place where they can be themselves and not have to worry about what others think of them. A sense of safety removes anxiety, which we know is a barrier to learning. However, this may not be enough if you are a same-sex attracted person. If there are no (positive) mentions of gay people, or examples of gay relationships, or discussions including gay role models, are we not complicit in keeping same-sex attracted adult students in the closet?

## The non-person issue

At the National Conference for teachers of English and Literacy in 2009, David Rhodes (no relation) presented a paper titled, 'Out of the silence: Bridging the queer divide in Australian secondary English classrooms'. In it he quotes Gerald Unks:

> Within the typical secondary school curriculum, homosexuals do not exist. They are 'nonpersons' in the finest Stalinist sense. They have fought no battles, held no offices, explored nowhere, written no literature, built nothing, invented nothing, and solved no equations. Ironically, they were neither Greeks nor Romans, and they did not write poetry, compose music, paint, or sculpt. The lesson to the heterosexual student is abundantly clear: homosexuals do nothing of consequence. To the homosexual student, the message has even greater power: no one who has ever felt as you do has done anything worth mentioning.

While researching some on-line tasks for students to complete involving the language of forms I came across the renewed version of BBC Skillswise. I have used Skillswise many times over the years as it is one of the few ESL websites also suitable for adult literacy students. There are multiple activities to do with forms and I noticed that the *marital status* area now included the category of *civil partnership*. Civil partnerships were legislated in Britain in 2004 to recognise same-sex partners in committed relationships. The forms on the BBC Skillswise website are acknowledging that gay and lesbian people exist and that they attend adult literacy and language classes and that same-sex relationships are, at last, acknowledged in the broader society. Forms are really an entry point to the world we live in—they are nearly always covered in the first unit of a course!

The importance of having your relationship identity acknowledged, reflected and celebrated by all levels of bureaucracy and community is true belonging. In 2010 the Australian Bureau of Statistics agreed for the *first time* to count same-sex partners who marked the married or de facto relationship box. While many same-sex partners would not have checked either of those options, it is important to note that the ABS differentiate between (legally) registered marital status and social marital status, irrespective of how the individual denotes their relationship.

> ABS will make available a count of opposite-sex and same-sex couples who marked their relationship as 'husband or wife' or 'de facto partner' in the relationship in household question… (David Nauenberg, Census Field Director, in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, http://www.smh.com.au/national/victory-for-gay-couples-as-census-finally-recognises-samesex-marriages-20110805-1ifbx.html#ixzz1kjBF6ggH)

I was really pleased to see the *civil partnership* option on the BBC Skillswise forms for a further reason. Forms can be intimidating and bewildering to many literacy students and there are many areas that need some explanation or workshopping, so the inclusion of *civil partnership* offers the opportunity for talking about relationships in general, or more specifically equal marriage rights, and allowing students to see the practical application of what may be an abstract idea.

## Inclusive classroom discourse

While completing my teaching practicum almost ten years ago, I sat in on a class of about fifteen adult literacy students. One student I remember well, was a young woman in her mid twenties who had struggled with literacy issues throughout her life. She had a close support network of family and friends who had assisted her with reading and writing tasks for her work and personal reasons, and she had become successful in her chosen career. She had become what Waterhouse and Virgona term a 'stereotype contradictor'. She had encountered failure in the mainstream education system, yet she had built up her vocational competence through 'stealth, observation and experimentation'. The stress however, of being excluded—having to hide her literacy issues from others—was too much, so like many others, she enrolled in a literacy course in order to improve in this area of her life. Her reasons for wanting to attend to her literacy issues were twofold: to improve her reading and writing skills, and to allow herself to be free of the secrets she was keeping from her employer and others around her.

This is not an unfamiliar story to literacy educators, and we well know the consequences of having to hide a part of yourself in order to feel accepted. She also identified as same-sex attracted. She came-out to the class one day, and said that hiding her literacy issues from the world was bad enough, she was not going to hide any part of herself anymore. Brave move, but she was right, having to hide a part of who we are leaves us fragmented and means we cannot commit fully to the relationships—whether that be student/teacher, new friendships, sporting teams.

We can not be one hundred per cent present when we hide or *protect* a part of ourselves.

It is well-researched that the bullying of young gay and lesbian students at secondary school level is responsible for early school leaving, multiple mental health issues and suicide in significant numbers. It makes sense then, that many of these people may have cause to access adult education later in life, or even as early school leavers. The adult literacy classroom needs to acknowledge same-sex attracted people as well as, and in order to, address their literacy needs.

> The language of social relationships is highly gendered and reflects the heterosexist nature of society, excluding same-sex attracted individuals. Terms such as *boyfriend, girlfriend, mother and father, husband and wife*, carry certain assumptions and reinforce heteronormativity. The language of the classroom should always be inclusive. Non-gender-specific terms that more than adequately replace these other *loaded* terms include significant other, spouse, partner and parent.

Literacy educators can partly address these needs by making the classroom a place where same-sex attracted people are included in the classroom discourse. Teachers can become familiar and at ease with the nomenclature: gay, straight, bi, transgender, queer. The language has changed so much in the last twenty years and issues concerning gender identity and sexuality are more out there than ever before. In doing this we are creating an inclusive learning environment and democratising the classroom.

**Linno Rhodes has worked in various ACE settings. Her areas of particular interest are adult literacy and students with a mild intellectual disability. She is currently completing her TESOL qualification.**

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learn to read and write in Gaelic. It so happened that Gaelic literacy for Gaelic speakers is part of the remit of the Highland Adult Literacies Partnership and we had just commissioned Sabhal Mor Ostaig, the Gaelic College in Skye, to develop a course for this target group. Catriona attended the pilot course and subsequently got a good job as administrator for a Gaelic learners organisation. She was very pleased. Not only had she gained a job but also she had retained some pride in her mother tongue and confidence in herself.

**Mary Rhind lives in the Highlands of Scotland and began teaching Gaelic literacy to Gaelic speakers in her own village because they had been actively discouraged from using Gaelic when they were at school. She currently manages the provision of literacy and numeracy, in both Gaelic and English, in the Highland area for The Highland Council.**

### A word of advice
A book I would recommend is *The Spirit Level* by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett (2009), which sets out the evidence to prove that life is better for everyone the more

equal a society is i.e. the less of a gap there is between rich and poor. It's a book that very much makes you think and want to act.

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# Making a difference

*By Julie Neeson, Dr Kaye Scholfield, Dr Sean MacDermott, Susan Taylor, Melissa Collits*

**This article concludes the account of a Community Learning Partnership project conducted in country Victoria over a period of eighteen months. The initial stages of the project were described in 'Making a Difference—Positive Parenting Pupil Participation'** (*Fine Print*, **September, 2010).**

## Introduction

To briefly recap, this Community Learning Partnership brought together three levels of education—Adult Community Education, University research and a small rural primary school—in an effort to break a cycle of family marginalisation and educational disadvantage perceived to have developed in parts of the rural town of Hamilton. The partners, Southern Grampians Adult Education (SGAE), RMIT Hamilton, and a local primary school aimed to re-engage the parents in formal education and training within a school setting, first by involving them in their children's learning and school activities, and then by delivery of targeted education programs.

A project officer was appointed to work closely and practically with the principal and teachers of the school and to facilitate operations between the project partners. Members of the project team met regularly to discuss ideas and formulate the ongoing development of the project. The project officer also consulted regularly with the school council and staff to discuss the project and develop strategies. She also became a member of school council.

At the time of the previous article, project activities and research had already led to a number of assumptions being challenged and several key issues were identified as significant in regard to the ongoing development of the project. These included:
- The parent body was not as homogeneous (level of education and socio-economic background) as originally presumed. This assumption influenced the initial approaches taken to accommodate the range of parent skills, needs, and interests, and to address barriers to engagement.
- The barriers to parent participation lay with parents alone. The project thus needed to question more broadly the challenge of creating an inclusive welcoming environment at the school.
- Parents would participate in learning opportunities if a good relationship was built and the opportunities were accessible (e.g. no cost, fun, and in a safe and familiar environment).
- Re-engaging parents in their own learning would result in them becoming more involved in their children's learning.

The 2010 *Fine Print* article concluded with the anticipation that:
- There would be direct benefits for children and their long term attitude to education, for their families, and for the school community.
- Parents would have learned new skills and feel more comfortable about being involved in the school community; they would become part of the school community and proactive supporters of their children's schooling; they would gain life skills, improved literacy and numeracy, and connections thus enhancing their employment prospects and life choices.
- A more cohesive and enthusiastic school community would develop.
- Participation in the action research process would assist the school and its council to develop improved education leadership including practical long-term engagement processes.
- It was also hoped that a long-term outcome of the project would be to assist in breaking the cycle of family dysfunction and marginalisation by creating a welcoming environment for parents, and providing adult education in the school setting.

The extent to which these issues were addressed and the goals realised will be reviewed following an outline of the research undertaken. The changing nature of the project in response to research findings, the challenging of the initial assumptions, and time and budgetary constraints will also be described.

## Parent and staff surveys

Surveys were conducted throughout the project to gather information on a range of subjects: the school's

communication with the parent body, parents' preferred activities, and what would facilitate parents' attendance at activity sessions. Parents and staff were surveyed to ensure that the school community as a whole was given the opportunity to contribute ideas and viewpoints. As mentioned previously, a key initial assumption was that the *poor* performance of the school was exacerbated by low levels of parental involvement. The surveys were designed to gain further insight into this and to inform activity planning.

Initial information was gathered about the educational level of parents and their knowledge of the project, and to gauge their interest in possible activities. This data was derived from several sources including face-to-face interviews, telephone, and existing SES data.

Various approaches were trialled in an effort to improve the response rate to surveys, culminating in offers of vouchers and prizes to encourage parents to respond. Parental response was an issue, not only in reference to information gathering efforts for program content planning, but also with respect to invitations to activity sessions. Efforts were made to contact all parents and responses were received from sixty-two per cent of the parent body. Interest in a range of activities was indicated. The majority expressed a preference for cooking or scrapbooking activities. Although there was potential to offer a wide range of activities, it was found that parents were interested in activities that were directly of benefit to their children and the school. This raised questions about offering formal learning programs within the time-frame of the project. Staff were also surveyed and, early in the project, their responses indicated concerns about teachers' knowledge and support for the project. With the benefit of hindsight, the need for teacher support should have been recognised and there should have been more effort to engage teachers from the start.

The project team had already established through surveys and feedback, that the school had a morale problem that had developed over time and related to a range of issues including demographic changes, some significant pupil-behaviour issues, and community perceptions. However it became apparent the barriers to the parents engaging with the school (i.e. their negative attitudes to schooling, low education levels, poor skills, a lack of interest in their children's schooling and perceived lack of opportunities to participate) were not entirely as initially assumed.

A second survey indicated a positive response in regard to the level of communication from the school, the opportunity to participate, and acknowledging the importance of being involved with their children's schooling. These responses did not appear to accord with the views expressed anecdotally and supported by the 2009 Government School Report indicating that the parent cohort was largely homogenous and disaffected with the school.

A key question raised both by these survey results and observations and reflections of staff, parents, and the project team was whether the parents were particularly hard to reach, or did that only apply to a subset of the parent body, and did the school itself in any way inhibit accessibility for some parents? Discussions at school council and informally with individual parents had confirmed the impressions that there were different groupings within the parent body and that this resulted in tensions within the group.

Following the organisation of several activities, a further survey was conducted to refine our understanding of what activities parents were most attracted to, whether the activities should involve school-age children and what time suited parents best.

## Program of activities

Initially, it was planned to deliver informal, fun-based sessions to encourage parents to be involved in a non-threatening environment, gradually building to more skills-based sessions. This formed the basis of the approach taken.

A five-step plan was formulated to deliver:

1. fun-based activity sessions in the school setting
2. skills sessions associated with their children's learning needs
3. modules from pre-accredited or accredited courses as offered by SGAE
4. pre-accredited courses
5. accredited courses

A combination of factors, such as parental preferences and available resources, dictated which, and at what time of day activities were to be offered. Given parents' stated preference for activities of benefit to their children, *fun-based* sessions concerning book covering, numeracy and literacy were offered. The level of take-up varied between eight per cent and thirty-seven per cent.

In an effort to make the shift from Step two to Step three activities, and to introduce more sessions that were learning-based but not connected to the children, cookery and computer classes were also offered. Parents had previously expressed an interest in attending these.

Unfortunately, the computer session was cancelled due to lack of interest. Disappointingly, the two cookery sessions (one held in the evening, one during the day), scheduled specifically to accommodate working parents, attracted a response rate of just ten per cent.

A further cookery event was held in Term 4. This time, however, it was held off-campus, in the evening and children were invited. Nearly a quarter of the school's families were represented, but as a number of families had both parents in attendance, the *true* response rate was thirty-six per cent. With a total of thirty-five parents and children attending, this was a very pleasing result. Five staff and four of their family members also attended. This activity marked an extremely positive highlight during the project. All activity sessions were generally well received by the attendees, but it was the family cookery evening that most captured the sentiment the project had been trying to embrace—a school community enjoying an evening to-gether and learning something new. It was hoped that such informal *fun* activities would help reduce marginalisation of parent groups, and encourage a welcoming environment for parents enabling them to feel more comfortable about being involved in the school community.

The final phase of the delivery plan was to offer two sessions that offered more skills-based learning. The first was a cookery module that could be credited to enrolment in a certificate course. This was marketed as a *taster* for adult learning to experience what it's like to *go back to school*. The cookery module did not attract any participants and did not proceed.

The second session, called Loving Literacy, was designed to provide insights into different learning styles and tips on how parents could assist their children with their comprehension and literacy skills. It received an encouraging number of acceptances (twenty-nine per cent). Attendance, however, still proved to be disappointing with a take-up by only twelve per cent of the parents. The low take-up for these two sessions may have been partially due to offering such a session a little too soon—too great a step from engaging in a fun-based activity to sampling adult education. Loving Literacy



provides a useful model for transition from purely fun-based activities to more skills/information based learning and a significant development in relation to developing a pathway to pre-accredited and accredited learning for a new group of adult learners in the community.

Within the constraints of the project, it was not possible to progress beyond Step Two activities to getting parents involved in pre-accredited or accredited courses.

## Insights from the research

Evaluation from participants focused in part on the understanding of the aims of the project and the actions taken. Parents also expressed pride in the school and its achievements, appreciation for the work of the principal, the school staff and the project officer, who attended all focus group meetings.

In the staff focus group, it was acknowledged how challenging the scope of the project was. Staff indicated that they were positive about what had been tried, acknowledging that there had been signs of progress with some families. They also said the project had influenced changes in their attitude such as not only contacting parents on negative matters but opening the communication lines generally. Such perceived changes in behaviour or attitude may not be attributable to participation in the project.

A number of key findings were made during the project. The two literature reviews, coupled with the feedback from parents, initial project activities, and other data, combined to challenge many of the initial premises and influenced the approach taken in an effort to improve the project outcomes.

The comprehensive literature reviews provided baseline knowledge of various elements of the project and

explored the distinction between parental *engagement* and *involvement*, research on family, and barriers to involvement. This review concluded that:

> Although parents' education and SES have an indirect effect on children's academic achievement, there is no evidence in the literature to support the contention that parents' participation in adult education results in a greater commitment to their children's education (Ref 2010 Positive Parenting Pupil Participation (PPPP) Literature Review, unpublished).

The project's implicit assumption had been that involving parents in the school would lead to improvements in children's engagement and school outcomes but the evidence base did not wholly support this. The literature review revealed that the type of parental involvement likely to be most effective in enhancing children's education is the interest and support they receive in the home environment. Parents can support their child's education by providing safe and stable housing, good nutrition and health care, assistance with homework, and a suitable study environment. Positive parent-child interaction was found to be significantly beneficial to school achievement (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). Based on the literature therefore, the project team found the link between the original premises and the proposed response was tenuous.

This challenged the most significant assumption underpinning the project: that lack of engagement by parents was principally due to characteristics of the parents themselves: their level of schooling and school experience as well as socio-economic and demographic background. These assumptions contributed to the view that the *problem* to be fixed lay within the parent body.

On the basis of the literature review, it was apparent to the project partners that parental education level and socio-economic status may be indirectly related to children's academic achievement but that additional factors, such as the distinction between involvement and engagement, should also be considered. Therefore the underlying logic of the PPPP project (to improve educational outcomes for children by improving the educational level of parents) was still applicable, it was already clear that the relationships between these factors would prove to be much more complex.

Reflecting upon the differences between parental involvement and engagement brought greater clarity to what the project was trying to achieve and it was accepted that the essence of the project was actually about parental engagement. Nevertheless, parental involvement continued to be seen as a worthwhile goal since it would provide other benefits to the school (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). These other benefits included strengthening the links between the school and parents who were characterised as having a low level of involvement. These parents appeared to feel more reassured as a result of being involved in the PPPP project activities.

## Problems with surveys

For the final activity, greater attention was paid to understanding parents' motives to engage. Twenty parents (considered a valid sample, and also a significant number of the parent body) were interviewed in order to uncover the beliefs that influence their behaviour in relation to attending a Loving Literacy programme. The responses of the parents were collated and utilised in the design and promotion of the programme. Feedback included that teachers' opinions and encouragement are valued by parents, that the actions of other parents can persuade parents to become involved, and that some parents find it helpful to bring a supportive person along. In general parents had many ideas to offer. The project approach may be a valid tool for enhancing parent engagement and calls for further research.

As the project progressed other key learnings included:
- Those who tended to participate (though not exclusively) were already parents who were engaged with the school community.
- The school's small size and the morale of the school community impacted on the project. The low morale and stress experienced by the school community at different times, particularly the behaviour issues of a number (a minority) of students, was notable. The actual size of the student population also, it is suggested, had a direct bearing on morale. The impact of a few highly difficult students in a small overall student cohort is significant.
- Parental responses as to the type of activities, the timing of activities, and intention to attend differed significantly from actual behaviour with respect to attendance. In engaging hard-to-reach learners, it is critical to firstly identify a gap that education, formal or informal, will address—and parents must want to fill that gap.

The successes are difficult to quantify. Percentage rates of attendances do not reflect the level of enjoyment of participants, which was significant in a school suffering tremendous morale problems. Some key outcomes were that:

- parents did participate in activities and did provide positive feedback
- school council, which was supportive from the start of the project, became more so as the project went on and were a significant source of ideas and support
- staff observed a positive difference in the attitude of some parents
- staff acknowledged a need to be more positive and welcoming to parents

These are all significant and meaningful changes, and signify a level of success in what was always acknowledged a difficult and slow moving project. The changes also measure, to some degree, a realisation of those goals outlined at the start of this paper.

Perhaps despite efforts to address a number of perceived barriers to involvement, those parents who would be deemed as those least engaged with the school largely remained so. The primary learning that can be drawn from this project is that a myriad of factors influence whether those classified as hard-to-reach learners will become involved in furthering their own learning. In general, those parents most interested were those already engaged with the school. Some of the more hesitant parents were encouraged to engage. That there was success with this latter group was particularly satisfying and had a significant impact on the attitude of the school.

## So where to now?

Although this project did not successfully engage parents in formal education, it did make progress involving parents in children's learning and school activities. Nevertheless, the project partners gained new understandings about engaging and communicating with parents in this school environment and opportunities to reflect more profoundly on the issues that the school was confronting. The school's priority is now very much focused on children's learning outcomes. There is a sense that the problems the school was concerned about in 2009 are no longer the chief concern of the school.

SGAE is now utilising the experience of the PPPP project as a platform to build on in formulating a second stage—the development of a Learning Community with the parents of another local primary school. A Learning Community is a group of people who share common emotions, values, and beliefs and are actively engaged in learning together. With funding from the ACFE Board Capacity and Innovation Fund 2011, a project officer has been appointed to assist a Steering Committee of interested parents to share information, organise events and activities, thereby developing a shared learning environment. The learning from the earlier project will inform this second stage and assist in moving hard-to-reach learners onto a learning pathway of value and interest to them.

The project provided interesting insights and was a fruitful partnership exercise in a small rural school. Problems facing the school, as has been acknowledged in this article, were not necessarily those around which this partnership accrued—that is the delivery on site of adult education programs. Nevertheless, the valuable learnings are already being applied to another program and will have wider applicability for others.

**Julie Neeson is the executive officer at Southern Grampians Adult Education (SGAE). Julie has worked in adult education for over twenty years. With a passion for literacy Julie has developed many programmes with a life skills literacy focus.**

**Dr Kaye Scholfield manages RMIT's Hamilton campus. She has a long involvement in community and education, strongly supporting partnerships including local research and initiatives that develop community capacity.**

**Dr Sean MacDermott and Susan Taylor are from RMIT Hamilton.**

**Melissa Collits is the project officer and enjoys using project management skills developed in a career in publishing, in the education sector.**

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# Numeracy matters

## Real life websites for numeracy
*By Libby Rowswell*

### Buying a used car

This activity involves using car sales websites as a context in which to apply a range of numeracy skills, and is suitable for use in a multi level class. There are many online car sales sites—best to choose one that is local to your area, with clear navigation and minimum distracting advertising and pop-ups.

I found the Cars Guide website (http://www.carsguide.com.au) useful as it gives a graphic and summary of the information including year, price, odometer, engine size etc. Search using the following criteria:

- set *Type* to used car
- set *Make* and *Model*—choose a common make and model e.g. Nissan and Pulsar to get plenty of data
- set *Year* range e.g. 2002–2008
- select *Location* e.g. VIC
- don't set a price range at this stage, click *Search*
- print the screen—this site usually displays fifteen cars per screen, so you may need to limit the number of cars that you include for the data set

The data is useful for activities related to locating numeric information, classifying and ordering numeric data. When doing the simpler activities, it may be better to cut the print out into strips containing the information for each car, so that students can manually order the information before recording their answers.

### Using mathematical language

These sample questions will get students locating numerical information:

1. Which is the oldest/newest car, and how old is it?
2. Which is the cheapest/most expensive car?
3. Which car has the largest/smallest engine? (This brings in decimals and metric.)
4. List the cars in order of… (Nominate the characteristic most appropriate to the current skill set of the student e.g. cheapest to most expensive, oldest to newest, engine capacity.)
5. Describe (written or spoken) which car you would choose and why? (Posing open-ended questions requires students to apply the language of maths.)

The BBC Skillswise website has activities for pre-teaching skills such as ordering numeric information. Some of these activities come in Word format so that teachers can edit as required.

A discussion around the best buy will involve mathematical language as students question the criteria on which to make a choice: should they base the decision on the cheapest car of all, on the age of the car, or on the number of kilometres? Presenting the car data in a table can be a good starting point for such a discussion. (See Table 1)

### Mathematical operations

Simpler operations relate to questions about the difference in cost between the cheapest and dearest car, the range in kilometre reading, or year range of the cars in the sample. More capable students can explore the average number of kilometres travelled by each car in a year and this average can be added to the table. Based on an acceptable yearly distance of 20,000 kilometres, students could discuss if each vehicle has a high, normal or low odometer reading based on its age. This could then be related back to the cost.

Presenting data in a table format makes it easier to extend the activities to calculations of mean and median price or kilometres. Restricting the make, model and year range in the original search will give raw data which is more comparable and make the calculation of mean and median more meaningful.

The concepts of deposit and stamp duty tax provide a context for calculating percentages. For simple percentages, set a standard minimum deposit rate as ten percent. Any calculations can be added to the table. Calculation of the stamp duty (currently $41 per $1000 in Victoria) can be assigned to more able students. If a higher level of

**Table 1**

|  | Year model | Age of car | Kilometres | Price |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Car 1 | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| Car 2 | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| etc | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |

complexity is required, try using a sliding scale for stamp duty. Again, BBC Skillswise has support material.

Buying a car often requires a loan from a money-lending organisation. Most bank websites have loan calculators and these can further extend the activity for higher-level students. Loan calculators require the user to type in the balance, loan term and repayment period and then calculate the repayments and the total repaid. Students can experiment with different loan terms in years and discuss how this affects the monthly repayments, and the total repayment. These figures can be used to find the total interest on the loan. All this loan data can be tabulated so that given the financial situation of a sample buyer, the students can make an informed decision on which loan term they would recommend, taking into consideration the buyer's personal circumstances and

ability to repay. The response could be done in a class discussion, or a written response.

The RACV site has data that can be used for further motoring activities: petrol pricing—track the price for a week, petrol consumption rates, car running costs.

## Other online contexts

Further ideas could be comparison of mobile pre-paid or plan; train, bus and airline timetables; planning a day out or holiday; online shopping.

**Libby Rowswell has taught adult numeracy and computer applications with the CGEA since 1994. She has a strong commitment to e-Learning and uses online resources as tools to assist with multi-level classes. She works at Swinburne TAFE.**

# Numeracy and the link with literacy

*By Chris Tully*

**Chris Tully writes from experience and advocates for integrated teaching of literacy and numeracy.**

Most people understand why a person needs to be literate to function in society. It appears to be much harder to understand that a person needs to be numerate as well, however there is a strong link between literacy and numeracy. Numeracy is often embedded in literacy contexts and a person needs to be literate to extract the numeracy content. For example, when we follow a recipe we need to read the list of ingredients and to understand the method or steps to make the recipe. This is the literacy component; the numeracy part is the correct weighing of ingredients, measuring, working out the correct size tin, and timing.

The students I teach often think of numeracy as being the adding and multiplying of numbers or calculation of angles in a triangle. They don't think they use numeracy in their life and more to the point, don't need to use it. I explain that the above examples often come from real life problems, plus numeracy is more than what they believe. Ask any of your students, as I ask mine, how do they get to classes on time, or how do they find the class the first time they come, or do they always have enough money to cover their shopping. It could be argued that these are literacy skills but all of these are numeracy tasks as well, involving time, location and money as well as estimation skills.

Last year with the Certificate I (Introductory), we ran a program with units that included numeracy and literacy components. We based the program around food and the units were covered in each CGEA class. The students organised a morning tea to raise money for charity. They first researched charities to decide which to donate to. They planned when and how the day would run: advertising, organising who would bring what on the day, and who was in charge of each area. The numeracy component included, but wasn't limited to, looking at diet (salt and fat content in foods), comparing similar products in terms of cost and nutrition and food pyramids and weights. One of the students was in charge of assigning each student ingredients to bring. Together the class worked out required quantities such as how much flour to bring when all up we required eight cups. They also planned a time line and roster for the morning. The morning tea overall was very successful and a lot of fun.

Where possible we try to integrate the numeracy with other modules and tend to run with themes. Some of the themes we have used are home renovations, food, body, wellbeing, environmental issues and employment.

# Technology Matters

## Innovative eLearning

*By Alison Forbes*

**Upper Yarra Community House managers, Alison Forbes and Carmel Allan, describe how they used funds from an Australian Flexible Learning Framework Grant to develop and deliver a unit from Certificate III in Aged Care, using an eLearning program. This innovative program led to the Learn Local Award for Innovation 2011.**

Upper Yarra Community House Community College (UYCH) is a Registered Training Organisation that delivers quality programs across a range of industry areas throughout the Yarra Valley and Outer Eastern Metropolitan Melbourne.

In 2010 UYCH Community College was successful in a tender for the Australian Flexible Learning Framework Grant for the eLearning Innovations Program. The grant guidelines required UYCH to be innovative in relation to our educational delivery of supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in aged care settings. UYCH was excited to have the opportunity to deliver the unit 'Work effectively with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people' HLTHIR404B, in an eLearning capacity, to our Certificate III in Aged Care students. We applied for the grant as we are aware of the need to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within the local community, and it is likely that our aged care students would work with people from these cultures. The eLearning aspect was useful because students would have to use technology in the workplace.

Our key project team and advisors included Coach Carole from eWorks (who provided guidance and training which allowed us to initiate the learning design for our project), Kevin Dawson (project manager), Thom Baselier (ICT manager UYCH), Suyin Chan (technical support) and Glenice Hopes (aged care tutor). Funds from the grant enabled us to employ experienced and knowledgeable personnel, who advised us on suitable technologies.

The technologies chosen for this project included: iPads, flip cameras and Moodle, all secured from the grant funds. The students were given comprehensive training sessions on the use of the iPads and then given the opportunity to practise for a period of three weeks to prepare and develop confidence in the use of this technology. The practise allowed students to feel supported, poised and ready to apply their new skills to the eLearning unit.



Teaching staff also spent a lot of time preparing. Our eLearning specialists, our aged care teacher and our project manager created simulation exercises around what the students would experience as they went through every element of the course. We pre-empted a number of potential problems that could have frustrated the learner, and corrected issues before running the simulation again to make sure that the problem was resolved. Our aged care teacher had an excellent grasp on how to integrate the eLearning and traditional components of the course. She guided the learners through the coursework and was an excellent facilitator. Her preparation for delivery of the course included attendance at many training sessions with the eLearning specialists.

The Flip MinoHD cameras allowed for around an hour of video. The learners produced a video recording of Aboriginal elders explaining the cultural issues associated with aged care, and completed assignments relating to the elements of the unit 'Work effectively with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people'.

Specialist staff were in place to support and encourage the students to be adventurous with the *new* technology, and this enabled students to work at the same level. We also noticed that language, literacy and numeracy barriers were not as prevalent due to using these particular technologies.

Students accepted using technology during their training, even though it was new and a bit scary, because they knew that many aged care facilities are now using software

packages for recording information relating to their patient care.

The variety of assessment tools utilised for this project catered for the differences between the students' learning styles. Assessment tools included: multiple-choice online quizzes, reference links, links to relevant embedded media, forums and blogs. Assessment methods included written assignments, research projects, written questions and answers, documented interviews captured using the flip cameras, discussion groups and forum postings.

Success of the project has been measured through student satisfaction surveys and feedback from relevant stakeholders including Aboriginal Elders, UYCH management, local aged care service providers and ultimately through the nomination and subsequent achievement of the Victorian Government Learn Local Award for Innovation 2011.

UYCH recommends other providers apply for Flexible Learning or other grants, as using technology in learning programs allows students to gain invaluable experience in using the technologies required of them in the workplace.



**Alison Forbes is assistant manager of Community Services. She has worked in early childhood for over ten years and in VET for three years. She began at UYCH tutoring in children's services, teaching Certificate III and Diploma level. She is currently developing the Advanced Diploma of Children's Services using much of the same technology as was used for the aged care unit.**

**Carmel Allan is the manager of UYCH RTO. Carmel has worked in the VET sector for twelve years. She has extensive experience training in business, retail and hospitality industry areas. She enjoys the challenges that adult learners bring and the differing learning styles. She came to UYCH as a project and has since moved into the RTO manager position. She brings a range of skills relevant to compliance, curriculum development and delivery and assessment methods.**

# Provider Profile

## The end of the line

*By Jacinta Agostinelli*

In 2010 in the third issue of *Fine Print*, we featured On Track Learning Horsham and its founder, Margaret Simonds, who died early in 2010. While in a volunteer capacity, Margaret established On Track Learning, known then as Wimmera Adult Learning and Basic Education Group, or WALBEG. Horsham is a regional town in the western district of Victoria with a population around thirteen thousand. While successful for forty years in its endeavours, On Track Learning was small and remote, and in this issue we discuss the committee of management's decision to close its doors.

The story of On Track Learning is the story of many small neighbourhood houses and learning centres, not only those in rural areas. Some centres merge and stay operational in that way but in rural towns this is not always an option.

Before the closure of On Track, there were two learning centres in Horsham. On Track Learning provided basic skills courses to adult learners, and to young people referred from organisations such as the Brotherhood of St Laurence. The other organisation called the Hub also has a long history of thirty years, and is definitely *not* the new boy in town. Judy Krahe the former chairperson of On Track Learning, says the Hub generally provides certificate and short courses and caters to a different market to On Track. The two organisations worked alongside each other for many years, and while a merge was discussed it was not viable.

Judy said there were many factors that contributed to the organisation discontinuing. Once a downward trend was noted, On Track sought the assistance of the Ballarat ACFE regional office and the support worked for a time. But at the end of 2010 the learning centre lost both its executive officer and its administration officer, and replacing two very experienced, crucial people proved too difficult. One officer moved to full time work and the other to a consultation role.

Finding tutors and committee of management members was a major contributing factor to closure, and according to Judy it became almost impossible to find qualified

staff and management members. While many teachers in remote towns such as Horsham only want part time work, the paperwork required by AQTF and Skills Victoria was an added pressure on staff and the available hours were no longer enough. The amount of work that On Track could offer a younger teacher or administrator was inadequate.

Changes to funding structures also affected On Track Learning. In regional areas student numbers are not large and under previous funding structures the organisation was able to cater for small numbers. But this is no longer the case.

Making the decision to close, cleaning up and sorting out matters were very stressful and sad, said Judy, and our main concern was student welfare. We ran a very successful Certificate III in Education Support and were concerned about participants of this course as well as participants in adult literacy and those with special needs. It was wonderful that the Education Support students and tutors were able to transfer to the Hub, however, Judy said, the small adult literacy class could not continue at the Hub.

Judy explains that the committee was sad to have to make the decision they did, but not bitter. Times change, she
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# Open Forum

## A year of reading

*By Lynne Matheson*

**'A Year of reading' is a new column we have introduced for the National Year of Reading and will appear in Open Forum in each edition. Lynne Matheson, our columnist, has extensive experience in schools, adult education and the tertiary sector. Previously president of VALBEC for many years, Lynne currently serves as secretary. We hope you enjoy her writing.**

The love of learning, the sequestered nooks,
And all the sweet serenity of books.
(Henry Wadsworth Longfellow)

Picture this: you enter a room with floor to ceiling bookshelves lining two walls. You walk over to a window seat with soft, sumptuous cushions and a view to the sea. A comfortable leather armchair is on one side of the window and on the other side, an inviting daybed with a check mohair blanket draped across it. In easy reach is a table set with fine bone china. You notice that the teapot is steaming slightly. A plate of delicate fruit tarts and Italian biscotti sit alongside a bowl of shiny cherries. You recognise a Mozart piano concerto playing in the background. As you scan the bookshelves you see familiar titles from your childhood. Looking closer you see titles from each decade of your life and many more that you have always wanted to read but never had the time. You see a note on the table addressed to you that says: *Congratulations you have been granted a year of reading. You can choose whatever you want to read and take as long as you like. There will be no interruptions … just relax and read.*

Wouldn't that be nice! For so many of us the dream of *a room of one's own with a view* and a library of favourite books, and unlimited time to read, would indeed be bliss.

We savour the time to read and the pile of books on the bedside table await those longed for weekend mornings or cold winter evenings when *having an early night* is a treat rather than a sign of old age.

As lifelong readers, we find it hard to fathom a world where reading is not a natural and constant element. Perhaps this love of reading was part of what motivated us to work in adult education, to make some small difference in learners' lives through making reading a valued and accessible part of their lives.

Do we take reading for granted? With the increasing availability of e-readers, will books eventually disappear from bookshelves and bedside tables? Will children grow up in a world without picture books? Will learning to read happen through an iPad app rather than in the lap of a loving parent? How has teaching reading to adults changed in the past few decades, if at all? How has the Internet changed how and what people read? How can the message be spread that reading contributes to both education and well-being? What does it mean to be well-read in today's world? How do we ensure that the generations to come value and engage in a culture of reading? These are some of the questions that we, as adult literacy educators, share with the organisers of the National Year of Reading, and would like people to consider in 2012.

The National Year of Reading 2012 (NYOR) is a collaborative project joining public libraries, government, community groups, media and commercial partners, and the public. The website www.love2read.org.au provides information about campaigns and events across Australia, and showcases projects and organisations which already exist to promote reading and literacy. There are three overarching goals NYOR has identified to help turn Australia into a nation of readers:

- for all Australians to understand the benefits of reading as a life skill and a catalyst for well-being

- to promote a reading culture in every home
- to establish an aspirational goal of parents and caregivers sharing books with their children every day

The National Year of Reading 2012 is principally about children learning to read and keen readers finding new sources of inspiration. There is recognition of the issues around low levels of reading skills in the adult population and how that impacts on families, employment and social inclusion. Check out the winning stories in the Adult Learners' Week 2011 short story writing competition that have a downloadable PDF file with Adobe Read Aloud function at http://www.love2read.org.au/dev/never-too-late.cfm (the voice is quite robotic).

It is worth scanning the NYOR pages for details of upcoming events and campaigns. Programmes in Learn Local and TAFE settings could use this website as a stimulus to talk about reading, plan reading events and try new ways of engaging students and their families in reading for pleasure, as well as for education.

We will continue this column, 'A year of reading' in subsequent 2012 editions of *Fine Print* as a way of engaging with the NYOR project. We decided that we would write and seek contributions about what reading means to us. We would write about the experience of reading a seminal work that influenced our philosophy and practice of teaching or a book that simply gave us the *aha* moment that set things in train for a career in adult education. Let me start the ball rolling.

### Books can be dangerous

The best ones should be labelled 'This could change your life.'

In 1990, as a starting out adult literacy teacher and program coordinator, I remember being struck by the absence of much in the way of seminal theoretical works and practical teaching guides. One book that I found most useful though was the quaintly titled *So you want to teach an adult to read?: a handbook for tutors*, by Pam Osmond (1984). I don't think it changed my life, but it did prove to be important in getting me thinking about adult learning principles and the whole raft of considerations when working with an adult learner. The emphasis Pam placed on establishing trust in the learning environment and taking a wholistic approach were most significant for me. Her suggested reading activities I used over the years: reading with your student(s)—a bit *Brown's cows* till you get into the swing of it; repeated readings—building familiarity with short pieces from the newspaper or a magazine (The Big Issue is a great source); read-along—a taped reading of a story (the abridged Tracks by Robyn Davidson was one my students enjoyed); shared reading—more advanced readers can read alternate passages; cloze—this was always a useful technique and could be set for different levels of difficulty. Revisiting the book recently I thought that really not a lot has changed and I would suggest that some of these reading activities would be going on in classes now.

Later in the mid 90's, when I went on to post graduate study, I was exposed to the likes of Friere, Gee, Horsman, Schon, Street and Vygotsky, which sparked and influenced my education philosophy. Articles in *Fine Print* and conference and workshop presentations by Bradshaw, Suda, Newcombe, Campbell and Waterhouse, to name a few, provided inspiration and direction. I look forward to hosting this column to read about the place of reading and influences on philosophy and practice of VALBEC guest writers.

## Dear reader
*By Dr Pauline O'Maley*

As a person who has had a dirty little addiction to fiction for a long, long time I would love to talk here at length about fiction. Oh the books I have read, from the adolescent's first visceral shock of reading about Meursault's nihilistic response to his actions on the beach in Camus' *The Outsider* to the middle aged blush when I locked eyes with Robert Dessaix on a tram; he shrank from recognition and I felt I had been caught rifling through his underwear drawer as I was at the time reading his lush, seductive *Night Letters*. And in between experiences from

the deep chill and obsessiveness of *Crime and Punishment* to the surreal encounter in a park with a gardener when I had dragged myself out of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* to walk the dog.

But I won't! I will resist that temptation because I want to talk about James Gee, and in particular his first and second editions of *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses*. When I first read Gee in 1992 I was totally hooked. He had a quirky style; he was droll and engaging

and yet he had such a very serious, urgent message about literacy and about educational equality.

Gee's conceptualisation of Discourse (with a capital D) and its relationship to literacy opened up my understanding of literacies as permeating every aspect of our lives.

> Discourses are ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes. A Discourse is a sort of identity kit which comes complete with an appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognize (1996, p.127).

His definition of literacy as 'mastery of a secondary Discourse' (p.143) and his distinction between primary and secondary Discourses posed the question about powerful Discourses and ways in which some are privileged, thus opening wide the question of educational equality.

I loved his powerful and witty metaphors, from biker bars to explain how Discourses are much more than just language, to dance to illustrate his concept of learning. And who could forget the colourful way he uses an example of a fictitious course called 'Banging 101' 'that gave students the general purpose skill of banging on things' (1990, p172), to illustrate the absurdity of decontextualised learning. He argues that this course would be a waste of time, it would kill students' interest in banging generally, because the best way to learn to drive nails well is to be an apprentice carpenter and the best way to be a fine drummer is to drum with other drummers. They need to acquire/learn the Discourses of carpentry and drumming in context. No decontextualised banging for him!

Yes I have been deeply influenced by other theorists who have made me think, challenged my unexamined givens, answered my questions, posed some more, frustrated, delighted, provoked and unsettled me—but Gee has done that and he has made me smile and smile again! He continues to write and to provoke, focusing more recently on the mismatch between students' online worlds and the world of the classroom. (see for example Gee, 2004 and Gee, 2007). I'll leave you with my favourite Geeism from that first book that so moved and delighted me:

> In the end, we might say that, contrary to the literacy myth, *nothing* follows from literacy or schooling. Much follows, however, from what comes *with* literacy and schooling, what literacy and schooling come wrapped up in, namely the attitudes, values, norms and beliefs (at once social, cultural, and political) that always accompany literacy and schooling ....A text, whether written on paper, or on the soul (Plato), or on the world (Freire), is a loaded weapon. The person, the educator, who hands over the gun, hands over the bullets (the perspectives) and must own up to the consequences. There is no way out of having an opinion, an ideology, and a strong one, as did Plato, as does Freire. Literacy education is not for the timid (1996, pp.38–39)

Your (no longer quite so timid) correspondent,
Pauline O'Maley

P.S Anybody who would like to borrow my much worn copy is welcome!

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**Dr Pauline O'Maley teaches at Victoria University in Melbourne and is a long time VALBEC committee member.**

# A good habit

*By Paul Rawlinson*

My first child was born in 2005. Among the usual anxieties that a first time parent experiences, I wanted some expert advice regarding how to help my child learn to read. As an ALBE practitioner I feel comfortable with supporting adults, however, supporting my own child with her reading development was uncharted territory.

I purchased *The Reading Bug and How to Help Your Child Catch It* by Paul Jennings, and it was a most valuable resource. It includes tips and age-appropriate book lists. The most valuable thing I gained from this book was to pass on a simple message: reading is fun.

We started with the usual words and numbers books for babies, and then utilised our daughter's natural curiosity and love of stories by having as many books around as possible, and took any opportunity to read to her.

Before long, she was taking story books to bed as well as her usual collection of teddies. She's just started grade one, and has been reading books above her age level because reading has become an everyday activity, like brushing her teeth.

All the effort that I invested with my first child paid off in spades when my second daughter was born in 2009. Her favourite catchcry is 'Me, too!'—and so it was no problem getting a book into her hands. She's now at the stage where she wants to be read to just before bedtime and sleeps with her favourite stories.

Paul Jennings' book taught me many things that I've translated into my ALBE practice—the main one being that I instill the message that reading is a joy, not a burden. I've found that ALBE students love to express their opinion, and love stories. The challenge remains to link these with a love of reading.

**Paul Rawlinson is literacy co-ordinator and teacher at Glenroy Neighbourhood Learning Centre in Melbourne's north-west. He is a VALBEC committee member.**

# Introducing Faten Chendeb: author of *When English made my future better*

Congratulations to Faten Chendeb, a student at Community West in Deer Park, for winning a prize in the national short story writing competition, *It's Never Too Late ... To Learn To Read*, funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, through Adult Learners' Week 2011 National Grant Funding.

Entrants were asked to write a story that would highlight the struggles and rewards of learning to read as an adult, and would inspire other adults to improve their reading. Faten's story is about leaving her home in Lebanon and how learning English is helping her to settle and improve her life. She was one of nine entries to win a prize for an unpublished work—an amazing feat in a national competition.

Faten's story and other prize winning stories are available as text and podcast on the love2read website, love2read.org.au. We have also published *When English made my life better* on the VALBEC website, with permission from Faten.

*Fine Print* managed to interview the winning author.

**What prize did you receive for being one of the winners?**
$1000 for an unpublished writer.



**Image by Harjono Djoyobisono, www.djoyobisono.com**

**What will (did) you spend it on?**
Buy pizzas for the class for a party. I bought a present for my daughter, she helped me type. Paid some bills.

**What do your husband and children think about your success?**
All happy—they couldn't believe.

**What was most helpful when you were learning to read?**
Coming to classes; my kids sometimes help me, read their school books.

**What is the most difficult thing about learning to read in English, as an adult?**

I read Arabic in my country, Lebanon, writing is from right to left and letters are different—a big difference.

**What part of Lebanon did you come from?**

Bakar Ssouna, near Tripoli.

**What is your favourite memory of Lebanon and home?**

Going to school with my friend when I was a kid and when I was a teacher in a primary school.

**What do you hope for your children?**

Finish school, go to university and find a good job. One daughter (fourteen years old) wants to be a doctor. My son (thirteen years old) he would like to go to police, or maybe engineering. My other daughter (twelve years old) would like maybe hairdresser or maybe dentist. My other son (ten years old) sometime he tell me 'Mum I like to be a chef, sometime he say, "I like to be electrician."'

**What will you do when you have finished learning at Community West and your reading is even better?**

I would like to go training for teacher—I love this job.

**What would you change in your life if you could?**

I would like my husband to find a different job—he drive taxi, very hard job, sometimes I don't see him for two days because he works night shift. We would like to open a business—fixing cars maybe. Also have more money. A daytime job.

*Fine Print* wishes Faten all the best with her future studies and her life in Australia. Read Faten's prize winning story below.

## When English made my future better
*By Faten Chendeb*

My name is Faten Chendeb and I was born in Lebanon. I have four brothers and three sisters. We lived in a village, which was a very nice place, because it had fresh air, fresh fruit and a very nice weather in spring and summer.

I went to study at Arabic school, because my country only speaks Arabic and I also learnt French. I went to university for four years and then became a teacher for primary school at my country. I loved my job.

After a few years I got married. My husband is Lebanese. He lived in Australia before I got married to him. He took a holiday just for one month and stayed with me in Lebanon. After one month my husband went back to Australia, while I was in Lebanon, I was waiting for my husband to send a form to the immigration apartment in Australia, because I wanted to come to Australia to be with my husband.

While everything was happening I found out that I was pregnant. I waited one year in Lebanon until I received my visa. Before I received my visa my baby was born in Lebanon. It was a baby girl. My husband had never seen his daughter.

When my visa came I got it but my daughter didn't get the visa, because someone made a mistake with her birth certificate in Lebanon. I couldn't stay because, in Lebanon after I took my visa it had been limited time. I couldn't take my daughter with me so I was forced to leave her, when she was 3 months old, so I had to leave her with my family in Lebanon.

I had to fly to Australia in September 1997 by myself. I was crying because I left my daughter back there and I missed my family. I was never happy in Australia because I didn't speak English and I didn't have my driver's licence. Everything was different and difficult.

I was always upset and crying because my husband worked night shifts with long hours. After one year my daughter finally got the visa and came to Australia with my friend. When I saw her I couldn't believe that was my daughter she changed everything in my life.

After a while, I studied two months of English at Community West. Then I stopped because I had four kids and had no time to learn or work. After my kids went to school I started to study English at Community West because the first time I went I was very shy because I never talked English before, and so I needed to learn and speak English for my future, so I could get a good job.

My kids had been helping me how I say a word and what that word means and sometimes I got to the library with my kids to read books and learn new information's. Sometimes I even read newspapers and it often helps me and I even learn new words.

English was hard for me to understand because I didn't know how to speak or read English because at my

country I never read or spoke English, so that why I decided to come to Community West. Sometimes if I don't understand a word I ask the teacher to come and help me and to tell me what it means.

I am very happy now because my English is not bad, all thanks to every teacher and especially Community West, because English had changed all my life and it is much easier for me to talk to people at Shopping Centres and if I have appointment.

I wrote this true story for use to see how much I have improved my English.



## VALBEC committee review

**As *Fine Print* is the journal for VALBEC we have decided to use it as a means for updating readers on committee news.**

The VALBEC committee sat down together in January this year for the annual planning meeting. In what is always a juggle to find a time to suit people between work and holiday commitments, there were eight of the eleven committee members present, along with Don MacDowall, administration and finance officer extraordinaire!

We began with a review of 2011 VALBEC activities. Committee agreed that the numeracy focus had proved successful, with positive feedback from members. The ACAL conference hosted by VALBEC in September was a highlight, with the added bonus of sustained attendance numbers for the Sharing Good Practice event in May. We felt that the high level of satisfaction registered in evaluation forms for both events reflected our intention to provide value for money professional development for members and the wider language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) field.

ACFE funds were used effectively in the completion of the Participation Action Research project that had two broad objectives: to explore innovative ways to enhance VALBEC's profile and extend our reach; to build stronger links with LLN practitioners, especially in regional and rural areas. The project began with the Enhancing VALBEC report from our member survey and resulted in improvements to e-valbec and a revamp of our website with additions to features and functionality. We are pleased to report that there has been an increase of over fifty per cent in VALBEC website usage; an additional eighteen per cent to the distribution list of e-valbec and our membership numbers have been maintained.

The publication and launch in Adult Learners Week of

*A Fuller Sense of Self* was another highlight with terrific flow on effects. There are plans to publish a second print run and supplement the stories on the website with teaching activities this year. *A Fuller Sense of Self* raised awareness of adult literacy learners' lives and experiences and enhanced VALBEC's profile.

Overall we were pleased with the achievements of 2011 and set in place plans for a focus on the National Year of Reading, both in *Fine Print* and the state conference, 'Read the word, Read the world'. We look forward to another active and rewarding year working with the ACFE board and member support.

### Activities for 2011

- Discussions at monthly meetings of issues and concerns related to policy and practice, professional development, curriculum, teaching and learning
- Organisation and hosting of ACAL conference
- Continuation and completion of Participation Action Research project
- A *Fuller Sense of Self* stories project completed with launch in Adult Learners Week
- Website review with ongoing changes and improvements including links to other state organisations and events
- Committee members attended and contributed to National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults focus groups, Employability Skills Framework consultations, Foundation Skills training package consultations
- Representation on Learn Local awards selection committee and attendance at presentation of awards in Adult Learners Week

- Provided speaker for State Library seminar at The Wheeler Centre for Books and Reading
- Involvement in ACE peak bodies discussions
- Meetings and liaison with ACFE project officers
- Attendance at ACFE Learn Local launch
- Support for ACAL in lobbying for funding for national coordinated activity and ongoing involvement of executive and state representatives
- Attendance at briefing for the National Year of Reading 2012
- Presentation of Participation Action Research project report at ACFE stakeholders meeting
- Promotion of relevant international, national and state events in e-valbec
- Responses sent to email questions to info@valbec on a range of issues including teaching qualifications, resources and availability of classes
- Updates to FAQ pages on VALBEC website to incorporate recent changes
- *Fine Print*, three editions published to schedule
- Commissioned design and production of new VALBEC banner

## 2011 professional development
- Understanding and Applying the ACSF, Wangaratta GOTAFE, February
- Sharing Good Practice, William Angliss Conference Centre, May
- *A Fuller Sense of Self* book launch, Glenroy Neighbourhood Learning Centre, September
- ACAL Conference, Literacy on the Map, September 27 & 28

- Understanding and Applying the Australian Core Skills Framework, BRIT, Bendigo October
- Numeracy teaching and learning practices for LLNP and other programs, Wodonga TAFE, November
- Twilight forum, Restor(y)ing lives—autobiographical reflection and perspective transformation in adults returning to study, November

## Committee membership

At the AGM in May we farewelled Corinna Ridley and Dianne Parslow, who has been a tireless and efficient Secretary, after many years of active involvement.

The VALBEC executive has undergone some change and now comprises:
- *Co-presidents*: John Radalj (The Gordon) and Kerrin Pryor (Morrisons)
- *Secretary*: Lynne Matheson (La Trobe Uni)
- *Treasurer*: Ann Haynes (NMIT)
- *General committee members*: Pauline O'Maley (VU), Yvonne Russell (Kangan), Marie Bonne (La Trobe Uni—Bendigo), Sandra Wolfe (BRIT), Natasha McCormick (GOTAFE), Linno Rhodes (Jesuit Social Services), Paul Rawlinson (Glenroy Neighbourhood Learning Centre)
- *ACAL State representative*: John Radalj

The VALBEC committee will keep members informed of our activities throughout the year in e-valbec. We welcome suggestions and feedback through *info@valbec. org.au*.

# Beside the Whiteboard

**Jude Newcombe is interviewed by Sarah Deasey.**

**You have had a long history in ACE. Can you briefly outline it for readers?**

In the early 1980s I began work as an adult literacy teacher in the Centre for Adult Education (CAE) Access Department and after a few years, became one of the founding coordinators in the Workplace Basic Education Unit. Later, as an industrial officer for what is now the National Tertiary Educators Union, I worked to get the first award for the ACE sector. In the 1990s, I had part time work: Executive Officer of the Network of Women in Further Education, ESL literacy teacher with Carlton Neighbourhood Learning Centre and ESL teacher and project worker in the Women's Education Department at Victoria University. From 1999 to 2009, I was manager at Glenroy Neighbourhood Learning Centre (GNLC). In recent years I worked at AMES as a project officer in the ACE Capacity Initiative, 'Responding to CALD Learners'. I am now an itinerant support worker and mentor in neighbourhood houses and learning centres.

**Tell us about your early pathway into teaching.**

In the late 1960s, I found myself struggling to survive as a secondary school teacher in impoverished classrooms in country Queensland. I taught English, French, History, Citizenship, Music and Maths. A whole batch of young QLD teachers, mostly just twenty years old, had been fearfully undertrained and ill prepared. It took a while for me to get to like teaching.

**How would you describe your teaching philosophy and methodology?**

When my politics began to change, shaped by feminism and the 70s protests in Brisbane, I began to think about my role as a teacher. I had stumbled across a book with a provocative title: *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*. It was a revelation to me. Revisiting it now, I see why! Although it's a book of those times, it is still powerfully relevant. It argues that questioning things is the baseline from which liberal democracy springs and calls upon teachers to engage students by having them learn to look below the surface and to participate in shaping their learning.

Critical literacy is about not taking things as given. Encouraging critical thinking in literacy development builds learners' sense of agency; it values what their experience reveals to them, what their knowledge, aspirations and anxieties suggest. Literacy acquisition takes place not just through transmission of a body of knowledge (or a set of rules about language), but through reflection, understanding and building visions for a better future. My favourite questions include: How else could this text have been written? And questions about purpose and vision: Need it operate like this or could it be done differently or better? (Baynam, 1995: 2). For CALD learners, cultural comparison is a fertile ground for critical literacy. In Australia, we do/say it this way. What happens in your culture/s? Why is it different? Teaching language and literacy is always about culture and social context.

Theories of literacy as social practice in the context of culture, theories about text and genre need to not just underpin curriculum, but to breathe life into teaching practice. In the process of accrediting courses, much has been obscured by the dizzying lists of assessment requirements and performance criteria. Teaching to fragmented *competencies* loses sight of the deeper processes involved in language and literacy development. The works of Halliday (1994), Martin et al (1997) and many others provide us with a much richer understanding of how texts (written and oral) work, and 'about a student's writing ability …and what is semantically at stake in text generation' (Martin et al: 1997).

Good teachers look for potential not just needs and scaffold learning appropriately. The early work of McCormack and Pancini in *Learning to learn* (1990) is

worth remembering. The course they developed drew on cognitive psychology (metacognition, theories of memory) and challenged learners to take control of their pathways to success. Never pathologising or infantilising adult learners, they maintained that all people have the potential to learn and keep on learning. These days, with such tight timeframes and pressures for outcomes in the classroom, it is a challenge for teachers to avoid reverting to notions of *good* and *bad* students.

I have a persistent memory of a conversation with a young woman, who had been in adult literacy classes for some years. She came to me some years after I had stopped teaching her. By then she had enough confidence and courage to reflect on her childhood and why she hadn't been able to learn then, but she still needed to ask, 'Does this mean I'm not stupid.' Shortly afterwards, feeling she had learnt to read enough, to write enough for her purposes, she left the program to find her dream job working with cars.

Why does this memory still haunt me? Clearly, it illustrates the inextricable relationship between literacy development and a person's sense of self. But maybe it also goes to the heart of how teachers can either destroy or build, how judging learners as dull or stupid stymies learning, and how important teaching is. In talking about the alienation experienced by underachieving African youth, Dr Berhan Ahmed talks of their need 'to find realistic messages of hope, optimism, encouragement and renewal in all their activities from English classes to employment support.'

**Can you tell readers about some of your classroom successes?**
The teaching I remember most clearly is the last class I taught about fifteen years ago at Western Metropolitan Institute of TAFE, now VU, taken over a semester with a diverse group of CALD women most of whom had been in the country about five years. Most spoke no English outside class. I had a lot of freedom to experiment, working in the course that was a precursor to ESL Frameworks. I had two goals: to encourage them to speak English outside class, and to teach them to read the health flyers you find in chemists and doctors' surgeries. So every session had a mix of talking, reading and writing.

We talked a lot about the weather (a very common conversation topic in Melbourne) and about health. We practised pronunciation and tag questions in role plays

and scripted dialogues. And then we began to play with nominal groups (Halliday, 1994: 180), learning word order and different ways they could be expanded. See Tables 1 and 2, **Nominal groups**.

From memory, I talked about the structure but didn't use Halliday's metalanguage. Word order sorting games, which involved physical manipulation of words worked well.

The women loved poetry in their first language. Working with nominal groups unleashed some of their creativity. At one stage the walls were plastered with colourful, poetic images:

the bright red balloon floating over the trees

pale morning light.

As we talked about health, we built nominal groups for illnesses and health complaints:

My son's got *an itchy red rash on his tummy.*

She's got *puffy red eyes and a runny nose.*

Of course this also achieved stronger knowledge of Field, and more intelligible pronunciation. We read and analysed health brochures, revealing the schematic structure, listing common words and phrases, asking questions about what the brochure was saying, e.g. How do you treat a cold in your culture? I used the genre based method of scaffolding writing: reading> text analysis>joint construction> independent construction. We had lots of fun, it was exciting and we all worked hard (I had done a detailed analysis of health brochures using systemic functional grammar as part of my study under Professor Christie). I think we all learnt more than we had hoped.

**What can you say about your time as manager at Glenroy Neighbourhood Learning Centre?**
I left teaching reluctantly in search of more stable employment and began as manager at GNLC, an organisation that had begun as a volunteer adult literacy program. When I arrived, the centre had a committed body of professional paid teachers working in appalling physical conditions: computers worked intermittently, the entrance to the centre was via a dark staircase above a boxing gym, and in the first three months, the classrooms

**Table 1 Nominal groups**

| a beautiful, | crisp | **morning** | with just a few white clouds |
|---|---|---|---|
| epithet 1 (describing 1) | epithet 2 (describing 2) | thing (noun) | qualifier |

**Table 2 Nominal groups**

| two | very hot | nights |
|---|---|---|
| numerative | epithet | thing/noun |

flooded five times. Getting the organisation into a new building was a strategic priority, but it took seven years of lobbying and negotiating.

During the ten years I was there, GNLC more than trebled its budget, staffing and student numbers. This happened in many community learning centres during the same period when more funding could be won. We expanded the adult literacy program (CGEA and pre-accredited courses), the ESL program (Frameworks and CSWE) and accredited and pre-accredited IT. We ended up with an extraordinary diversity in the centre user population: seniors and young people, Glenroy born and bred, long term and newly arrived migrants, and people of all abilities and educational backgrounds. The communal areas buzzed at tea break as this great mix of local people met each other and talked. Respect was the key note and laughter was often in the air.

**How did your teaching experiences shape your future roles?**
I wanted teachers and teaching to be valued and supported, but managing was a steep learning curve. When I arrived, the youth literacy program was dynamic, but challenging and underfunded. It also needed stronger frameworks for support and clearer policies. By the time we became a VCAL provider, the youth team could run two groups, the second in partnership with Banksia Gardens Community Centre. Teachers were a bit less exhausted. In-service on whole of school approaches and close attention to centre policies and procedures helped.

As the centre developed, I was able to build teams of teachers: the ESL team, the adult literacy team, the IT team. I looked for ways to foster professional dialogue: a staff room (contentious in the new building negotiations), curriculum development projects, judicious team teaching and as much financial support for professional development as the budget allowed.

**What advice do you have for new managers of ACE programmes?**
ACE management seems to be going through a generational change as many longstanding and experienced managers and teachers retire or move on. I suggest new managers take time out from the day-to-day pressure and mounds of accountability requirements to sit back and dream about possibilities. For all the relentless detail, remember that there are few jobs that give you the chance to promote good educational practice and to do this in the context of community development.

**Can you say a bit about the Responding to CALD Learners project?**
The Responding to CALD Learners (RCL) project is an ACE capacity initiative managed by AMES. In the first year, research into new CALD settlement throughout Victoria was undertaken and the strengths and needs of community learning centres were identified. Professional development took place in all ACFE Regions in 2010. In 2011, eight action research projects were funded so that teams in community learning centres could research, implement and document changes and learnings in one of three areas: Engagement, Supportive Learning Environments, and Supported Pathways. Some of the insights have been very interesting, particularly those that illustrate unpacking an aspect of workplace language and culture. As Yates (2008: 32) says: 'we all need to develop skills in understanding the role of cultural and linguistic practices in workplace communication.' The project write ups will be published by ACFE. Look out for the publication launch and associated series of presentations by the teachers and co-ordinators who have been part of the action research projects. The RCL launch will be held in June this year.

**Sarah Deasey is the Further Education Coordinator of Carlton Neighbourhood Learning Centre and chairs the *Fine Print* committee.**

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# What's out there

## Red Dog

*Reviewed by Frances Toscano, Kangan TAFE*

Abridged by Jennifer Bassett in 2010, this novel will be enjoyed by Certificate II and III students of the CGEA.

Bassett has retained the spirit, the humour, the ambience of outback Australia and the dedication and love of human and dog alike. Readers of all ages will enjoy the marks of a classic tale: man loves woman; an entire community loves a dog of spirit and independence; a dog elicits laughter and devotion from women and men; two central characters die; love overcomes tragedy.

The events of *Red Dog* are centred in everyday working class lives, albeit set in the remote towns and outback of north-west Western Australia in the 1970s when mining was king. The dusty, hot, dry environment does nothing to dampen the fun and laughter of life shared with Red Dog, an itinerant Australian kelpie whose home is the entire vast state of Western Australia.

Five pages of language activities and a biography of the original text's author, Louis de Berniere, assist student readers. The language activities aim to develop reading accuracy, comprehension, grammar, prediction and inter-pretation. The biography outlines the diverse occupations, from academic to manual labouring, that the author has practised. His sense of humour in everyday situations is revealed in the quote: 'I hope that my cat never finds out that I have written a story to celebrate the life of a dog.'

Two Western Australian maps along with detailed black and white illustrations on every third page add visual support for readers. The eight chapters of five or six pages each present the story in readable chunks. The front cover contains the most heart-warming image of all—a beautiful red-brown Kelpie poking his head through the side of a cattle truck.

The distinctively Australian vocabulary will be no barrier to CGEA students. A two page glossary interprets the local jargon, from *smoko* and *barbie* to *tucker* and *mate*.

Mateship is the thread that binds the events of the novel and this will delight readers. The friendships between the solitary multicultural miners of Karratha and Dampier,

the regard and love for Red Dog by all members of the community, and Red Dog's love for just one man, will touch the hearts of CGEA students.

This abridged version of *Red Dog* would be a great preamble to further study of the Australian outback and associated occupations, of history and geography, and of Australian film. The iconic Australian phrase 'I've been everywhere, mate', concludes the story.

A powerful tale, *Red Dog* has huge potential for adult literacy students.

### Editor's note

The review copy of Red Dog was supplied by Bookery Education which is a division of Foreign Language Bookshop Bookery Pty Ltd. This new entity is the result of a merger in 2011 with The Bookery. We would like to acknowledge Richard Hughes who was a well known fixture at VALBEC conferences and supporter of the LLN field over several decades. We thank him and wish him well for the future.

FLB Bookery is located at 259 Collins St and has the largest range of English language and literacy textbooks and resources in Australasia. The experienced and helpful staff at FLB Bookery will continue to provide expert advice and all stock titles are available to browse or order online at www.bookeryeducation.com.au

I believe it is not possible to teach numeracy without teaching literacy and similarly it is not possible to teach literacy without numeracy, hence the need integrate the two, as well as other skills like computing. If the two skills are taught separately, we should be overlapping our literacy and numeracy teaching at the very least.

**Chris Tully teaches numeracy at Kangan TAFE in Melbourne.**

said, and being a small town, committee members will stay in touch.

The work of the committee, of Margaret Simonds and former staff, will live on for that is the nature of teaching and working in the community. Communities develop and change and, while in a physical sense, a community's foundations do not always stand the test of time, they remain present, through the enriched lives and work of people.

**Jacinta Agostinelli is the editor of *Fine Print*.**

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