

this issue:

Cultivating heart power  
By Lynne Matheson

The Post Literacy phase of the Literacy  
for Life Foundation Aboriginal adult  
literacy campaign By Deborah  
Durnan & Bob Boughton

The possibilities of plurilingual  
perspectives in language teacher  
education By Julie Choi, Monica  
Lindau, Jodie Whitehurst, Romila  
Kulenthiran & Kailin Liu

Empowering Karen learners through a  
funds of knowledge approach  
By Amanda Hiorth

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## features

- VALBEC turns 40** 3
- Cultivating heart power** 4  
*By Lynne Matheson*
- Making it stick: the Post Literacy phase of the Literacy for Life Foundation Aboriginal adult literacy campaign** 11  
*By Deborah Durnan and Bob Boughton*
- The possibilities of plurilingual perspectives in language teacher education** 16  
*By Julie Choi, Monica Lindau, Jodie Whitehurst, Romila Kulenthran and Kailin Liu*
- Bridging the divide: empowering Karen learners through a funds of knowledge approach** 22  
*By Amanda Hiorth*

## Regulars

- Practical Matters** 29  
A wealth of language learning  
*By Felix Chapple*
- Foreign Correspondent** 32  
Transforming lives  
*By Vicky Duckworth*
- Open Forum** 35  
Join the discussion  
*By Libby Barker*  
Learn Local Awards  
*By Linno Rhodes*  
Reflecting on the 2018 ACAL Conference  
*By Manjit Bhamral*
- What's Out There** 42  
From 'empowerment' to 'compliance':  
neoliberalism and adult literacy provision  
in Australia  
*Reviewed by Pauline O'Maley*  
Best practice guides: pre-accredited language  
and literacy programs  
*Reviewed by Margaret Corrigan and Cathy Gill*

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Adult Education in  
the Community

# Editorial

There is a reason I chose the photograph of billy button flowers for the front cover of this edition. I took the photo on a wildflower hunt in Central Victoria in October. My wildflower guide had promised me spotted leopards and red spider orchids so perhaps my expectations were keyed to the exotic but at the start of the expedition all I saw was bush—I must admit to being somewhat underwhelmed.

However, as I stood gazing into the forest, I suddenly ‘got my eye in’ as my guide had predicted I would. Suspended on slender stems only a few centimetres tall, were hundreds of golden spheres, each one no bigger than a marble. They looked for all the world like a gathering of tiny suns, glowing brightly against the grey-green leaf-litter and shale. You don’t quite see the glowing effect in the black and white image but I hope you get the idea and eVALBEC subscribers can see the colour version in the December edition of the email newsletter (email [info@valbec.org](mailto:info@valbec.org) with eVALBEC\_Subscribe in the subject line to join).

The symbolic connection between a gathering of tiny suns and the theme of empowerment that runs through this edition of *Fine Print* is self-evident. I hope you will be inspired by the diverse stories of empowerment in these pages and that those articles that tackle the counterpoint of empowerment—compliance—will lead to further discussion in your workplaces.

The reason I chose the photograph, however, has more to do with the circumstances of its generation than the image itself. It was only when I stopped and really looked that I noticed the subtle beauty of my surroundings. I believe this act of noticing is essential for educators. Unfortunately though, the busyness of everyday life means that we often only get the chance to stop and take stock at the end of the year.

So, as it *is* nearly the end of the year, please take the time to stop and sit down with *Fine Print*. Start with Lynne Matheson’s Arch Nelson Address. It will slow your heart rate and put you in the right headspace to read—*really* read—the rest of the journal.

Thank you to everyone in the *Fine Print* community for contributing to the fortieth year of production: the writers, photographers, production team, editorial committee and you, the readers. I wish you all the best for the end of the year and a safe and happy summer break.

Deryn Mansell

To comment on this edition of *Fine Print* or to propose an article or interview subject for a future edition, contact [fineprint@valbec.org.au](mailto:fineprint@valbec.org.au)

The Victorian Adult Literacy and Basic Education Council (VALBEC) aims to lead the adult literacy field through identifying issues of importance to practitioners and facilitating positive change. This is achieved through networking, professional support, the sharing of information and the promotion of best practice.



# Cultivating heart power

by Lynne Matheson

Arch Nelson Address, ACAL conference 14 September 2018



What gives your heart power?

How do you nurture heart power in yourself and others?

What gets you out of bed in the morning?

Arch Nelson observed the ‘heart power’ of people in rural communities in their capacity for compassionate behaviour and willingness to help others in times of need (Nelson, 1996, p.109). A recent example of this heart power has been the support shown for communities in drought affected regions of Queensland and New South Wales. More broadly, the concept of heart power might be a driving force for individual and community action to make a difference in society. It enables the enduring qualities of goodwill and generosity of spirit to be cultivated and enacted in the everyday.

I believe that people in the adult education sector have demonstrated forms of heart power over the decades. In my talk today, I will share stories and writing from the past to capture aspects of the shared meanings of this diverse sector. Much of my talk may seem steeped in nostalgia; my sources are selective. However, I trust that through reflecting on the past it is possible to be more intentional in focusing our energies in the present.

In his book, *Resilient* (2018), Rick Hanson refers to the basic human needs for safety, satisfaction and connection and that by growing inner resources to better meet these needs we can become more resilient and experience greater wellbeing. He suggests that there are practices we can engage in that will be instrumental in building these inner resources. Meditation and mindfulness practices are being used effectively in educational, sport, business, medical and military contexts. I will invite you to engage in some mindfulness practices during this talk that I trust you will find beneficial.

## Where to start?

Preparing for this talk, I have gone down many wormholes. I began by reading *Fine Print*, going back through the past decade and beyond. I felt like a bowerbird attracted

to shiny objects created by multiple voices: local, national and international. I was struck by the quality and range of articles, from the highly academic and theoretical to the intensely personal, and with plenty of examples of talented teachers and practical teaching advice. Throughout all this reading, however, I felt a frequent sense of groundhog day!

I turned to Arch Nelson’s memoir for insights into his story and the contribution he made to adult literacy through the 1970s and 80s. This led me to consider three women and VALBEC publications that have influenced me over time.

In line with the conference theme, I hope to acknowledge the strengths of adult educators and the grit necessary to withstand the turns and churns of government policy and increasing global influences, to reflect on motivation, and pose some questions about your own storylines.

What are the qualities we admire in adult educators, thought leaders and writers?

What is it about this sector that keeps people committed and connected, not just over years but over decades?

How do we develop the resilience and positive mindset to keep going?

The ACAL conference provides opportunities to share in a desire for professional learning that brings us together from across Victoria, Australia, New Zealand and this year from Canada. I am encouraged by the number of sessions in the conference program that have engaged participants in conversations around learning theories and teaching practice.

The past two days have no doubt been full of stimulation and provided valuable thinking space about a whole range

of things related to your work and the work of others in this diverse sector. At the end of the conference you will return to your busy lives and pick up on all the threads of family, friends and work.

*(The audience was invited to become fully present in the here and now by breathing mindfully for three deep breaths.)*

### **Arch Nelson's story**

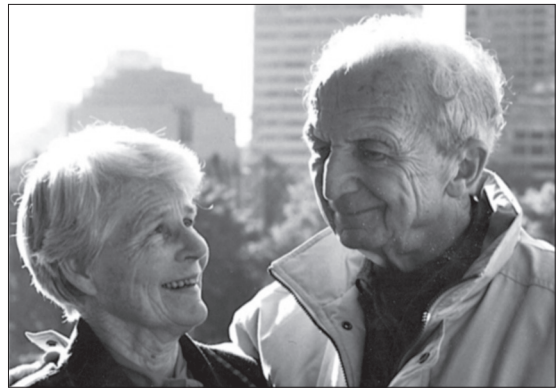
Many of you may not have heard of Arch Nelson before today nor the role that he played in adult education and the early years of ACAL. Born in 1911, Arch Nelson was in his 80s when he wrote his memoir, *My life. As I remember it.* (1996).

He described his rural upbringing and the influence of people such as his 'Gram', a pioneering woman from England. Strong women figured in his life, with his wife Erica principal among them. His love of learning was apparent from an early age and he was supported by his parents to attend secondary school and later teachers college in Adelaide, which was not the norm for farming families at that time.

As a young teacher he showed empathy and kindness to his students and recounted a story of a particular student, Harry, who had difficulties with his school work which he took out on others in the school yard. Arch wrote that he consciously built a friendly community in his classroom and was convinced of what he called 'the power of auto-suggestion' (Nelson, 1996, p.43). This seemed to me like an early version of a strengths-based approach whereby he demonstrated the power of positive language and high teacher expectations, recognised as key to effective learning.

His approach to his role in the Army Education Service during the Second World War was grounded in a belief in democratic principles of dialogue to grow a sense of community and confidence, which was unusual for a military context. He believed that freedom of thought and expression should be basic to a democratic way of life and this was a key driver for his work in setting in place continuing adult education programs at the University of New England. He saw the potential in the models of Freire to use discussion and dialogue for adult literacy learning and to impress the value of lifelong learning in communities.

Arch worked tirelessly for continuing adult education and for adult literacy as the first Chairman of ACAL, from 1976



**Arch Nelson with his wife Erica**

to 1984. He used his wide networks to communicate with national and international leaders in the field, while at the same time being involved at the local level as a volunteer in the Armidale literacy program.

One of Arch Nelson's achievements was to edit a collection of essays called *On the importance of being literate* (1981). He engaged some of the key figures of the time to write about what it meant to be literate and express their views on how adult education could contribute to a more literate society. Students along with tutors from around the country were included. Each of the four political parties was given space to express their policy positions with the words of Doug Anthony, John Button, Don Chipp and Wal Fife duly recorded.

### **What are our values?**

In his introduction, Arch stated that the main message of this book was to show that:

The level of literacy in our society is an index of the respect, the affection and the compassion we have for each other, and that these things, respect, affection and compassion are—or should be—basic to our way of life. (Nelson, 1981, p. x)

How do we define and develop a capacity for respect, affection and compassion in ourselves and others? When I think of each of these things in relation to adult education they have several layers:

#### **Respect**

- Respect for the rights of the individual
- Respect for knowledge and wisdom
- Respect for our own reflective practices

## Affection

- Affection for our learners in how we show care and kindness
- Affection in how we create safe and inclusive learning spaces
- Affection in how we demonstrate honesty and authenticity

## Compassion

- Compassion through empathy for others
- Compassion for the wider issues of our world
- Compassion for our own life challenges and wellbeing.

What are your values?

Who has influenced you in forming these values?

How do you live out these values in your life and work?

*(The audience was invited to spend a few moments reflecting on their own set of values and consider where they have come from.)*

**How important it is for us to recognize and celebrate our heroes and she-roes.** (Maya Angelou)

Maya Angelou was an American poet, singer, memoirist, and civil rights activist. Her words were published in several genres and many languages in a career that spanned more than fifty years. I find her quotes insightful and happily connect with the themes of this talk.

We all have our heroes and she-roes, be they family members, friends, writers, philosophers, teachers, colleagues. Whether by osmosis or direct instruction, and all that lies between, we have been influenced on our life journey and career pathway by significant others. There are strong women and men who reside in the pantheon of adult educators who have been role models through their actions and their words and to three in particular, I wish to pay tribute today.

Back in 1976 when ACAL was starting up, I was a fledgling Drama teacher launching out into the state education system armed with a whole lot of enthusiasm, but not much in the way of pedagogy. I had a grab bag of ideas premised on some of John Holt and Ivan Illich's educational philosophies. Drama was all about experiential learning and creating learning spaces that would organically lead to transformative experiences.

We had some great teachers at Rusden, but one standout for me was Dorothy Heathcote, an innovative UK educator who visited for a term. In her teaching she adopted an enquiry process and with her warm and empathic manner embodied a very different teacher identity to what I had known. I am sure that for those of you who came through secondary teacher training at that time, there was much hope for new ways of engaging students and battling against the system. With the passion of youth, though, came a fair degree of 'winging it'.

After teaching in the northern suburbs of Melbourne, and completing a Bachelor of Education, I moved into adult literacy education. The sixth annual summer school at La Trobe University was where I first met Bev Campbell. I went on to study the Graduate Certificate in Education (ALBE) and in our evening classes, Bev introduced us to the works of Freire, Gee, Kress, Vygotsky, Schon and indeed Jenny Horsman, among others. Through lively discussions, my class of mostly mature age students grappled with our understandings of each new theory. We were encouraged to take our learnings back to our classrooms and become reflective practitioners. Bev modelled an inclusive teaching style and her ability to make theory accessible provided a solid foundation for teaching in the world of ACE and TAFE.

Understanding and engaging with learning theories and pedagogy is critical to our professionalism. With the demise of dedicated university departments and courses and limited budgets for professional development, it falls to the individual, managers, mentors, informal communities of practice and professional organisations to sustain a knowledge base and lifelong learning ethos.

Bev had played a significant role in adult literacy in Victoria from the early 70s when she worked first as a volunteer and then as an adult literacy educator. Through her work as an academic, writer and in teacher education she has been influential in the sector. Bev served on the VALBEC executive committee and had terms as President and was a regular contributor to *Fine Print*. Bev researched and wrote *Reading the Fine Print: A history of VALBEC 1978–2008* and its launch was part of the celebrations of VALBEC achieving thirty years as an organisation. How quickly another decade has passed!

While the focus of the book is very much VALBEC through the lens of *Fine Print*, and the recollections of key people involved, it does have much to offer in

understanding the shifts and turns of adult literacy education in Australia. It stands as a valuable resource for newcomers and experienced practitioners alike.

Bev observed that adult literacy educators are respected as a 'special breed' (Campbell, 2009, p.200) who are responsive to changes and prepared to engage with the debates around pedagogy and thus keep alive the contested spaces of adult literacy teaching and learning. Looking around the auditorium today I am inclined to agree with her.

Bev wrote that professionalism 'is not coherent and stable' and is dependent on 'insights, reflections, influences and values drawn from all aspects of life' (Bradshaw, Campbell, Clemans, eds. 2009, p.26–27).

Bev also wrote of the subversive nature of adult literacy education and challenged notions of marginalisation that learners, and indeed adult educators themselves, carry due to the bureaucratisation of adult education (Bradshaw, Campbell, Clemans, eds. 2009).

She expanded on this by stating that:

A subversive education is one which teaches how to 'read against the grain', to interrogate the language of all sorts of texts, and not to accept taken for granted, naturalised ways of representation. (Bradshaw, Campbell, Clemans, eds. 2009, p115- 116)

We can draw from this today a view that adult education teaching can range over an eclectic mix, making subtle shifts in response to learners' needs. To work with creativity, flexibility and some humour, within the bounds of curriculum and compliance in ways that honour the learner.

With professionalism comes a sense of shared purpose and contribution—both critical factors for work satisfaction. For many in adult education it is the convergence of storylines and shared values and beliefs that enrich the work, the quality and strength of working relationships that builds lasting commitment and connection.

What are some of the elements that combine to shape professional identity?

- Individual values and life experiences—who you are and how you have come to be
- Significant influences and relationships—what you have observed and learned



Some of the texts that informed this address

- Intellectual curiosity and reflective practice—how you continue to learn and grow
- Frameworks for learning and teaching—how you enact your craft
- Student stories of transformative learning—who inspires you
- Commitment and connection—how you sustain your practice.

## Respect

What have been the main influences on the development of your professional identity?

How have others helped shape your teaching practice?

Consider the many influences on your work and life journey.

*(The audience was invited to spend some moments in reflection.)*

**My mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive; and to do so with some passion, some compassion, some humour and some style.**  
(Maya Angelou)

In 2005, I was privileged to be part of the 'Women of Spirit' writing project that led to the publication of *Fancy footwork: adult educators thinking on their feet* (Bradshaw, Campbell, Clemans, eds. 2009). Delia Bradshaw was the instigator of this group of women who met regularly to share and discuss reflections on their experiences in adult education. Many Saturday afternoons were spent deep in conversation, with much laughter and some tears, as we



explored what it meant to be an adult educator and what we could learn from each other in this community of practice.

Delia has had a long career as an adult educator and in teacher education in a range of roles. She has been a significant influence through her writing and curriculum work, in particular with the early development of the CGEA. She has maintained her passion for women's and multicultural education matched with her belief in education being key to the world becoming more just, harmonious and hopeful. Her approach has always been steeped in spirit and curiosity.

Delia wrote of creating a learning space that encouraged critical thinking and a sense of community (Bradshaw, Campbell, Clemons, eds. 2009, pp 86–88). Delia described how she consciously prepared for the learning by being mindful of her own inner spaces and the clarity of her role in guiding the learners. She set out to create a generative learning space. This was achieved by making sure that the room was set up to be welcoming and by being explicit about the goals and shared purpose of the learning community. She signalled to the learners in multiple ways that respect and trust were inherent to the learning space and that care in preparation and consistency of routines was a natural part of teaching practice.

Much earlier, I remember encountering Delia at a presentation on *Transforming lives, transforming communities: a conceptual framework for further education* (Bradshaw, 1999) that she had produced for the ACFE board. This was a ground-breaking document that provided rich material for conversations about further education on a whole range of levels.

Delia designed the framework around the four key organising ideas that I believe continue to be relevant today: Multiplicity, Connectedness, Critical Intelligence; and Transformation. Here was a curriculum design structure that articulated good teaching practice by being explicit about educational practices, learning outcomes, recognition outcomes and pathway outcomes. *Transforming lives, transforming communities* was created with a great sense of optimism and concern for lifelong learning to be valued and nurtured in our society. It was hoped that it would have a long shelf life. To an extent, the A-frame and Learn Locals' focus on pre-accredited courses that are learner centred and offer pathways are keeping alive these concepts.

The conference theme of learning in diverse communities echoes the concepts of multiplicity and connectedness, the increasing diversity in our population and the impetus for learning programs that crucially 'need to recognise multiple personal and social goals, identities and allegiances' (Bradshaw, 1999, p.24).

Connectedness encourages us to recognise the value of relationships within and beyond the learning environment and the potential to build social capital: the connections between learners and, as evident at the conference, the connections between ourselves as practitioners.

The increasing range of digital sources of information, and misinformation, demand of learners more sophisticated and discerning critical intelligence than was imagined back then. The recent VALBEC forum on Literacy 4.0 highlighted the challenges for the sector in terms of access and skills development in these evolving digital spaces; the introduction of myGov is a recent example. Meta-cognitive skills around awareness of how we learn, are particularly relevant with the growth in blended learning and online delivery.

Transformation is implicit in the goals of education to build the capacity for agency and action beyond the learning environment in communities, as well as for active citizenship. We all have the ability to continue to grow in the spaces of reflection and self-knowledge and as Jenny Horsman said in her keynote this morning, to find that sweet spot for learning.

### Affection

How do you bring affection to your work?

How do you create safe and welcoming learning spaces?

*(The audience was invited to visualise a time when they and their learners were fully engaged in learning and to tap into those feelings of being in a vibrant and supportive learning space.)*

**I've learned that people will forget what you said,  
people will forget what you did, but people will never  
forget how you made them feel. (Maya Angelou)**

The power of student stories has resonated through the decades from the days when the first ACAL conferences had a stream devoted to students and *Fine Print* regularly featured student writing. More recent student writing

editions of *Fine Print* have featured some wonderful stories of resilience, growth and change. Another example being the ACAL, RaPAL and Festival of Learning collaboration that produced *Resilience: stories of adult learning*.

There have been many other collections of student stories produced locally as booklets, magazines and digital stories that celebrate and showcase student learning and life experiences. VALBEC published *A fuller sense of self* in 2011, and launched it at the Glenroy Neighbourhood Learning Centre to an appreciative audience of family and friends. One of the drivers for this book was the aim of raising public awareness of adult literacy—so often lost in the data driven and deficit model stories in the media.

The six stories in the book provide powerful insights into the experiences of adult learners and illustrates ‘the sense of accomplishment and possibility that emerges when individuals are able to “read the world” around them’ (Bowen, 2011, p.6).

The author of this book, Tricia Bowen, has worked as an adult educator, oral historian, editor and writer over several decades. She brought to this project her abiding sense of social justice to honour the lived experiences of each individual learner. Many pages of transcripts from the interviews conducted across Melbourne and regional Victoria, were synthesised into this book. With its simple format, the book illustrates how a new sense of being had grown out of adult educational experiences.

The six stories are organised around concepts ‘that inform a larger narrative about the nature and power of literacy’ (Bowen, 2011, p.6).

For the learners these are a sense of:

- Connection—the importance of belonging and feeling cared for
- Possibility—a growth mindset that sees the potential for change
- Awareness—understanding of how we learn to see the world differently
- Community—feeling able to participate and contribute
- Self-belief—the confidence to work towards and achieve goals in life
- Understanding—seeing the changes that learning brings and being in the world more fully.

What can we take from these concepts of potential and growth?

How do they connect with your own experiences of working with learners and building community?

Are they intrinsic to a mindset that adult educators bring to their work?

Tricia has since completed research with teachers and her recent *Fine Print* article (2016) explored some of the connections between philosophical thinking and understandings of professional practice and identity. She reflected on the different states of *being* and *doing* that the teacher moves between.

Tricia found that in her conversations with teachers, they expressed a sense that they were being nourished by their work, and the sense of community, both with the students and more widely, that comes with the job. The teachers reflected on how their work contributed to a sense of identity, of self-worth and connection. I think this can be extended to the sense of community that comes from belonging to a professional organisation such as ACAL or VALBEC.

In the reporting focused environment in which most adult educators work there is an emphasis on doing all the tasks required in the time allocated. Tricia contends that in being with students it is imperative to be mindful of ‘...who we are when we teach, how we interact with our students, and how that might also contribute to the learning equation’ (Bowen, 2016, p.3). She posits being authentic and ‘consciously connected with students in shared focus’ (Bowen, 2016, p.7) as a way of being in teaching and assisting students to achieve success in their learning.

## Compassion

How does working in adult education nourish you?

To survive and thrive in adult education, both learners and educators need to find ways to nourish themselves and each other. In other words: to cultivate heart power. I trust that during this talk you have had opportunities to reflect and that the moments of being present and evoking positive experiences has enriched your sense of professional identity and connection. I hope you will remember some of Arch Nelson’s legacy and consider ways to further cultivate heart power and compassion in your work and in your community.

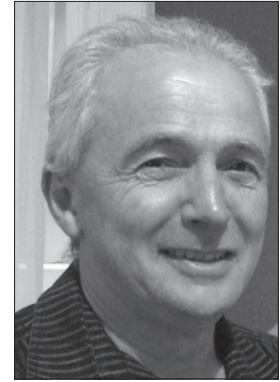
*(Time ran out so that my planned heart meditation was not possible. Insight timer, a free app, was recommended to the audience to follow up for their students and themselves)*

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- Lynne Matheson has been a member of the VALBEC executive committee since 2000 and *Fine Print* editorial group since 2002, with a term as *Fine Print* editor from 2014 to 2017. She currently works in Learning and Development at Melbourne Polytechnic.**

# Making It Stick. The Post Literacy phase of the Literacy for Life Foundation Aboriginal adult literacy campaign

*By Deborah Durnan and Bob Boughton*



This article has been adapted from a peer-reviewed paper presented at the ACAL Conference in Melbourne, September 2018.

Across western and north western New South Wales, there are dozens of small to medium size towns, many of them including Aboriginal communities as a significant part of their population. In 2012, the authors began working with a national Aboriginal steering committee on a pilot project in one of these towns, Wilcannia. The aim was to investigate whether a mass adult literacy campaign, based on the Cuban Yes, I Can! (or *Yo, Si Puedo!*) model, could be effective in increasing the rate of adult literacy in these communities (Boughton, Ah Chee, Beetson, Durnan, & LeBlanch, 2013). We had learned about this model by working alongside a team of Cuban education advisers in the national literacy campaign in Timor-Leste in the previous decade. By the time it concluded, the Timor-Leste campaign had enrolled over 200,000 adults in its classes and reached into almost every village in the country (Boughton, 2018). The initial pilot in Australia, funded by the Commonwealth's Workplace English Language and Literacy program, was sufficiently successful to attract further funding to extend the pilot to the nearby towns of Bourke and Enngonia in 2013 and 2014. A new national Aboriginal organisation, the Literacy for Life Foundation, was then established to roll the campaign out across NSW and into other states and territories. By the middle of this year (2018), the campaign had run in seven communities with a total Aboriginal adult population of over 2000. Almost 300 Aboriginal adults with a self-identified low level of literacy had joined the classes and 64% had completed and graduated. At the time of writing, the campaign is moving into two more New South Wales locations, and planning has begun to trial the model in a remote Northern Territory community.

The campaign roll-out has included a participatory action-research evaluation, managed through the University of New England, and is also now the subject of an Australian Research Council Linkage Research Project. In previously published papers, we have described the three-phase campaign model in some detail. In this paper, we focus on one aspect only of the campaign model: Phase Three (Post-Literacy).

## **Mass campaigns and the Yes, I Can! model**

Mass adult literacy campaigns have played central roles in the national development strategies of countries in every part of the world for at least the last two hundred years (Arnové & Graff, 2008). The country which developed the Yes, I Can! model, Cuba, had its own national literacy campaign in 1961, and this campaign inspired many which followed, including the work of Paulo Freire in Brazil, and campaigns in Nicaragua and in several newly independent countries in Africa. It was during this period, from the 1960s to the 1980s, that UNESCO became active in promoting such campaigns, until this work was stopped through the intervention of the World Bank and the United States (Boughton 2016). At this point, interest in such campaigns in the more industrialised countries of the North, and among literacy academics and practitioners in those countries, especially in the English-speaking world, began to recede.

However, in parts of the Global South, such campaigns continued, often through mechanisms of 'South-South' solidarity and cooperation, in which countries like Cuba, which had completed their own successful campaigns,

assisted other countries to initiate and conduct theirs. From these international experiences, Cuba developed the Yes, I Can! model which was capable of being replicated at fairly low cost in other countries of the Global South. Here in Australia, as in Timor-Leste and every other of the thirty countries where it has been deployed, the model has to be contextualised to local circumstances, but it nevertheless follows the same basic three-phase model

Phase One (Socialisation and Mobilisation), runs for the duration of the campaign. A local Campaign Working Group is set up; a household literacy consultation is undertaken; local Aboriginal staff are recruited and trained to deliver the Yes, I Can! lessons; a public launch is held to raise the community's awareness about adult literacy and its impact; an office and classroom is established and participants are enrolled. Throughout the campaign, local staff continue to 'socialise' the campaign in their communities, including holding regular graduations to celebrate the achievements of each intake and invite the next group to join. Phase Two (Yes, I Can! Lessons) consists of sixty-four basic reading, writing and learning lessons delivered utilising a set of DVDs. The lessons typically run over thirteen weeks for twelve hours per week with a maximum of twenty people in each class. The local facilitators and coordinator undertake continuous training and capacity development by the Literacy For Life Foundation team of professional educators who also monitor and review student progress and validate data collection. The coordinator networks within the wider community to build partnerships and pathways for the students to follow when they complete the campaign. Phase Three (Post Literacy), which is the subject of this paper, consists of twelve weeks of structured literacy based activities for approximately eight to ten hours per week. The activities are designed to consolidate participants' literacy competence, extend their learning confidence, and build their citizenship and work skills.

### **What is post-literacy?**

While we first learned the concept of 'post-literacy' from the Cuban education mission in Timor-Leste, we have since discovered an extensive international literature on the topic (e.g. Rogers, 2002), much of it associated with UNESCO's efforts to support adult literacy campaigns and programs in the Global South. Like many concepts in adult literacy education, there is considerable debate over its meaning, but what most authors have in common is the view that 'post-literacy' refers to the need to consolidate and extend the very basic literacy skills that are developed

when people with minimal literacy first begin to acquire it. For example, a 1993 UNESCO manual describes it thus:

This idea [post-literacy] generally refers to processes and activities especially developed for neo-literates, which are designed to help them become fully functionally literate and to be autonomous learners. The essential aims are to prevent regression to semi-literacy or worse and to develop those higher-level literacy skills which are essential for autonomy in learning (UNESCO, 1993, p.7).

Putting aside for a moment the now-outdated terminology (e.g. 'neo-literates', 'semi-literacy'), the fundamental concept is that literacy, while it involves specific learned 'skills' and 'operations', is only built and consolidated to become sustainable through social practice. Agneta Lind, who has been working on campaigns in the Global South since the 1975 campaign in Mozambique, reminds us that 'the term "post-literacy" is misleading', in that it disguises the fact that literacy is a continuum: 'Literacy skills are a continuum and develop throughout life in literate environments, but without literate environments and useful application, they stagnate and are easily lost' (Lind, 2008, p.83). The key term here is 'literate environments' (Easton, 2014).

Unlike in many parts of the Global South, Australian society is saturated with 'literate environments'. The problem of post-literacy in the communities where we have worked is that people with low and very low literacy are excluded from effective participation in those environments, including, for example, the schools that their children and grandchildren attend. In fact, their lack of literacy often makes having to engage with such environments a major source of oppression and stress. An extreme example is when people with low and very low English language literacy must interact with the police and court system.

Lind also rightly points to the need, well-known to adult literacy practitioners, for 'practical application'. Adults will choose to join a campaign and build their basic literacy for specific reasons, to improve their lives and that of their families and community. Unless the basic skills learned in Phase Two are applied fairly quickly in circumstances where their value is demonstrated, they are less likely, as we say, to 'stick'.

To summarise, post-literacy takes place once people have acquired very basic reading and writing skills. Its aim is to practice and consolidate the literacy and learning

competence and confidence students gained in Phase Two, through active participation in available 'literate environments' in ways that have immediate practical application. The Post Literacy phase of the campaign, as with the previous phases, must therefore be contextualised to the specific situations in which the campaign is operating. Equally important, it is about strengthening a culture of literacy and learning within the community as a whole, which is the ultimate aim of the mass campaign model.

### **How Post Literacy is implemented in the Yes, I Can! campaigns**

Although each phase of the campaign is different, the phases feed into and support each other. For example, during Phase One, the local campaign team have already mapped the local community, identifying potential partners who can be called upon in Phase Three. As the campaign rolls out, they build up their understanding of the local context, identifying available expertise and resources, potential family and local history resources, significant cultural sites, work experience placements, facilities such as a computer lab, library, or twelve-seater bus. They also gauge agencies interested in participating in the program either directly, for example a local health service may like to deliver a women's health workshop; or indirectly, for example the Police Citizens Youth Club may offer access to a kitchen for a cooking class. Several weeks before Phase Two finishes, planning for Phase Three begins in earnest.

The planning involves collaborating with both the students and the Local Campaign Working Group to design a curriculum which meets the needs and aspirations of students as well as community priorities and fits within the available resources and budget. The network of campaign supporters, established in Phase One, is consulted about access to possible activities and resources identified during the mapping exercise. The curriculum development process begins by working with the students and the Local Campaign Working Group to nominate three or four out of eight key literacy 'impact domains' identified from previous evaluations. The domains are: culture, education, community, economy, politics, justice, health and housing. The aim is to achieve impact over the longer term by targeting a few high priority areas. The group is led through an interactive process of identifying possible indicators of impact resulting from improved literacy for each of the selected domains. For example, if health is selected as a priority domain, one indicator is improved access to the health service when self or family are unwell, and before illness develops.

The nominated domains are then aligned to eight 'thematic areas': language and culture; family and local history; health and nutrition; computing; legal issues; community and citizenship; housing; and core work skills. This last one includes a work experience component and, if possible, an accredited VET module delivered by a registered training organisation. The next step is to decide the actual workshop topics related to each theme, identify local resources and people, and prepare a series of session plans which enable students to experience literacy as a social practice. We have found that each theme works best if it continues for at least four weeks with one topic per day.

Sessions are designed to connect to the students' ACSF literacy levels and to reinforce aspects of the Phase Two lessons, for example the positive messages with which each lesson begins and tasks such as completing forms, basic punctuation, using a dictionary, writing a paragraph and a personal letter. Each session seeks to mirror the Yes, I Can! lessons in terms of being a learner, working well together, taking ownership of one's own learning as well as the structure of the session and literacy tasks including self-editing of work. This consolidation and repetition enables students to continue to strengthen their identity as learners, practicing basic classroom and literacy processes which were previously unfamiliar and even intimidating.

When the program is at the final draft stage, usually three weeks before the Phase Three start date, it is presented again to the Campaign Working Group and students for feedback. Final adjustments are made before distributing to partners and referral agencies such as Job Active agencies and the Department of Corrections. Once started, the students are provided with a copy of the weekly program of learning activities every two weeks. Over ten to twelve weeks, a one-hundred-hour program of social context literacy learning is delivered as a series of interrelated structured activities utilising local expertise and resources, with literacy development embedded in each session. Students complete a minimum of seventy hours tuition to meet graduation requirements. During this phase, the team continues to work to identify pathways for each student into relevant formal VET or school education, driver education, community work, social enterprise and/or employment or other opportunities to fulfil the personal goals they set at the beginning of Yes, I Can! and revisited at the beginning of Phase Three.

## How do we make it stick?

Successive evaluations have found that, according to the participants, local Aboriginal leaders and other agencies which become involved, the key to the effectiveness of the campaign model is that local Aboriginal people are on the front line, coordinating and facilitating the lessons, with the professional educators in the background. As a result, people say that 'their own mob' are really in charge of the campaign and are trusted to do it. This approach means the learning and literacy development gains traction quickly. People want to learn, they want to be in class learning together, gaining what they feel to be really useful knowledge to improve their own and family and community life. Literacy is more likely to stick because, as discussed above, local staff, students and community members are actively involved in designing the curriculum and in its delivery. The mass literacy campaign model builds from below and leads from behind.

The glue making literacy stick comes from ensuring that Post Literacy contributes to the existing community driven development strategies and programs. This, in fact, has always been an aspect of the mass literacy campaign, as expressed in the words of one writer from the 1970s: 'Literacy creates and post-literacy reinforces the possibility for new literates to have access to information, to decisions and responsibilities concerning their own development' (Kessi 1979; cited Rogers et al 1999, p.34).

The model calls for Post Literacy to bring the various domain sectors together to enable participants to envisage the possibility of a better future, and begin to take small steps towards a safer, more secure, healthier and more productive life. For many participants so far, the Post Literacy phase of the campaign has been the first time they have been offered an opportunity to do a genuine work placement, or invited to meet with the mayor to discuss a pressing issue such as non-potable drinking water, or talk to a local police superintendent about police intimidation, or meet as a class with the school principal to discuss ways to improve teacher-community relationships.

Embedding the Post Literacy phase inside everyday community life under the leadership of the local team means the campaign quickly evolves into being a 'hub for community'. The students value the fact that the staff work with them, support them, witness their lives. Students are safe to bring their lives into the classroom. Their issues and interests are the curriculum. People know that it will be understood, that they don't have to explain things and that they will get the help they need. Students are not asked to

leave their world to begin the process of learning but rather the team works together with the class to build the road into that 'other world'. The local team helps people begin that journey, that transition. Rules of respect pervade the classroom, 'the number one rule', say the local staff. Valuing student knowledge and experience from the outset and building upon it is critical to learning *to be a learner* which in turn impacts people's identity and sense of dignity. Not only are low literate students gaining new knowledge and critically reflecting on their life experience but they also grow confidence to interact with the literate world on a more equal basis. It is this change in self-perception as a literate person capable of having voice and being heard which has proved to be so powerful in terms of impact. This change resonates with Freire's 'learn to read the word, to read the world'.

## Nurturing a culture of literacy

In many ways Phase Three is the most critical component of the campaign model, in that it opens another gate or gates into the world of further learning, productive community participation and importantly, improved decision making over one's life. During this phase, participants are prepared to walk from the safe and secure Aboriginal space through the next 'gate' into the wider world of learning, social life and possibly paid employment. Post Literacy provides opportunities for participants to apply their newly acquired literacy in a diverse range of contexts seeking to make it stick so that the literacy gains are sustainable over the longer term.

The campaign model is about providing a solid bedrock upon which the community can slowly build its future in collaboration with each other and the agencies which serve them. Success depends on nurturing a culture of literacy in everyday life; otherwise the likelihood of impact will be minimal. The experience of using literacy to make informed choices or decisions in the context of their own life is for many, in the words of Freirian scholar, the late Paula Allman, an 'abbreviated experience of transformation' (Allman, 2007, p.272).

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Local facilitator Tannia Edwards in Brewarrina



Discussing constitutional recognition at a Post Literacy class in Brewarrina

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Images courtesy of Literacy for Life Foundation



# The possibilities of plurilingual perspectives in language teacher education

By Julie Choi, Monica Lindau, Jodie Whitehurst, Romila Kulenthran and Kailin Liu



Recognising the complex meaning-making resources and practices that operate in transnational multilingual lives, language experts around the world challenge monolingual orientations to language education, proposing more fluid, complex, and resourceful approaches to mainstream language education (de Jong & Freeman Field, 2014; French & de Courcy, 2016; García & Kleyn, 2016) which include multilingual/plurilingual (Lin, 2013; Cenoz & Gorter, 2015), multimodal (Early, Kendrick, & Potts, 2015), and multiliteracies frameworks (Rowell & Walsh, 2011). In relation to teacher education, a prominent theme in the literature is a need to prepare teachers for contexts of diversity and an ability to effectively teach linguistically and culturally diverse students (Hutchinson & Hadjioannou, 2011; Scarino, 2014). Scholars call for more context-appropriate and sophisticated pedagogical frameworks that build on the existing linguistic resources and practices of both language learners and teachers (Ballinger, Lyster, Sterzuk, & Genesee, 2017; D'warte, 2014; Ellis, 2016) who as 'co-learners' work together towards twenty-first century transformative goals (Cummins, 2000; Miller, 2010; Kalantzis & Cope, 2012; Li Wei, 2014). As a language-teacher educator working towards such goals, I (Julie) understand engaging with contemporary understandings of language and language practices in multilingual lives as crucial in helping language teachers to think critically about the pedagogical stance they will be enacting in their superdiverse classrooms as part of their educational training.

Moving away from a structuralist paradigm, language, in the contemporary literature of applied linguistics and sociolinguistics is not viewed 'as organized as a self-defining and closed structure, set apart from spatiotemporal context' (Canagarajah, 2017, p. 1). It is viewed as a practice, 'an activity rather than a structure, as something we do rather

than a system we draw on, as a material part of the social and cultural life rather than an abstract entity' (p. 2). It is also a mobile *resource* that is made up of 'bits and chunks of language that make up a repertoire' (Pennycook, 2012, p. 98) that speakers draw on to shift in and out of styles, discourses and genres. Such fluid views of language have led applied linguists concerned with linguistic diversity to shift away from an enumerative strategy of counting languages often denoted in the term 'multilingual', in favour of the term 'plurilingual' which shifts the attention on individuals' repertoires and agency in several languages—how they overlap and intersect and develop in different ways with respect to languages, dialects and registers. Elsewhere, my colleagues and I (Ollerhead, Choi & French, 2018) have advocated for language teachers to take up a 'plurilingual stance'. Teachers who take up such a stance typically embody the following beliefs and understandings:

- a. Successful learners of English are successful plurilingual learners and communicators, rather than pseudo native speakers.
- b. All of a student's language knowledge is part of their single plurilingual repertoire, and languages are not siloed in their mind.
- c. Understanding of plurilingual practices such as translanguaging, switching, mixing, translating as the norm.
- d. Understanding that language competence is realized in its performance and practice, not as a set of knowledge inside a learner's head.(p. 5)

In a subject called Teaching English Internationally which I coordinate and teach at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education, I present these ideas to local and international pre- and in-service teachers who are training to become English or non-English language teachers either

in Australia or overseas. Though our time together is short (eight weeks), we explore these complex ideas through various multimodal in-class activities and discussions looking at a variety of research articles from around the world. For their final assignments, teachers are asked to reflect on the perspectives that most interest them, argue for a position and make links to pedagogy. Upon reading the assignments this year, I was once again reminded of the importance of teaching teachers about big philosophical perspectives. In asking some of them if they would like to contribute stories of their budding transformations to the public, we came to collaborate on this article. Their vignettes below demonstrate how plurilingual perspectives have incredible power in changing teachers' practices, discourses, identities, and minds.

### Monica - Mon portrait de langue

I have been a mainstream primary teacher in Victoria for seventeen years and pride myself on making connections with my students, understanding how they learn and how I can move them forward, finding out what they are interested in outside the classroom and tapping into these hobbies and interests to engage and excite. However, I have recently realised that I am skimming over a very important element. I have missed opportunities to make students' culture and language visible in the classroom and perhaps I have been teaching with a monolingual mindset, which is dominant in Australian schools.

In our first Teaching English Internationally class, Julie asked us to complete a language portrait and initially the idea filled me with dread. I was surrounded by multilingual students and being a speaker of only one language, I wondered how I could complete this task. As I began to colour (with English as the dominant language, some French I have learned through my love of French films and the Indonesian I have picked up through my travels) I decided to include the languages of the students I teach and the friends I have, represented by coloured bracelets (see figure 1). When my portrait was singled out by a fellow student as unique and interesting, my feelings of dread subsided and I began a journey to unlocking the plurilingual mindset inside of me, the openness (as represented by the heart) to embrace the cultural and linguistic diversity that I am lucky enough to be surrounded by every day in my classroom.

Julie's weekly readings and seminars challenged me to question my monolingual beliefs and I slowly began to make adjustments to my daily teaching and classroom practices. My word walls became multilingual, we began to sing

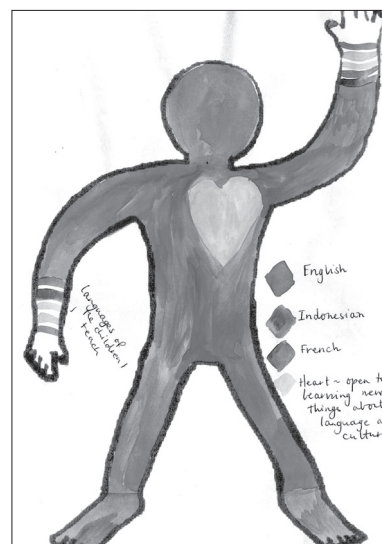


Figure 1. Monica's language portrait

'happy birthday' in the languages of the students in my class, we examined number systems in different languages, encouraged shared reading of bilingual texts by inviting parents and grandparents into the classroom and began to enjoy a more linguistically diverse range of multimodal texts. Already, I have seen by changing my thinking about language learning and use and giving my students greater space and time, they are able to draw on linguistic resources available to them to make connections, build interpersonal relationships with other students and feel more valued in their learning.

While I am only at the beginning of this journey, I am now teaching and learning through a more plurilingual lens and am excited about the changes I can make to engage, motivate, scaffold and support all learners in my classroom and ensure that during this process students' cultural and linguistic identities are fostered and developed. Through this lens I no longer see language as discrete and compartmentalised but rather as interconnected and ever changing through personal experiences, global activity and social connectedness. Looking back on my language portrait, I would change only one thing, the bracelets rather than single would be more intertwined to represent this interconnectedness as the languages in my classrooms begin to overlap in order to make 'real' meaning.

### Jodie - From silence to song: phase one of a plurilingual journey

Like most language teachers, I have always embraced multiculturalism in my adult EAL (English as an Additional Language) classes, encouraging students to

share their stories, cultures, recipes, photos and beliefs. Welcoming the rich tapestry of cultures is undoubtedly one of the great joys of being an EAL teacher, not to mention a wonderful springboard for communication between members of the class. However, upon recent reflection, inspired by Julie's Teaching English Internationally course, I realised that this sharing of cultures within my classroom had largely been done in a monolingual way. Despite greatly valuing the world's languages, it became apparent to me that I was not actively encouraging students to share their languages in the classroom. This realisation has since led me to examine my approach more closely, to gauge how my students' myriad linguistic resources could be welcomed and effectively utilised within the learning space.

In order to make this shift, I first had to ascertain the key factors that had prevented me from establishing a plurilingual classroom. The two main factors I identified were:

- a. perceived student expectations—one student's complaint about her classmates in a former class who always spoke their first language (L1), alongside the request from another group of students to introduce a penalty jar for any non-English utterances, had contributed to my impression that an English-only space was what my students desired.
- b. my doubt regarding my ability to teach in a plurilingual manner, given that I don't speak or understand the first languages of most of my students.

My next step was to reverse these English-only expectations, by drawing upon the suggestions of scholars such as Adoniou (2015) and Cross (2012), who maintain that sharing the first language of one's students is not a prerequisite to creating a plurilingual space.

In the last few months, I have made some simple yet significant changes to my approach, to ensure that my students understand that their languages are not only welcome but also valuable resources for learning English. In contrast to my former habit of mixing up students of the same first language when setting group work or pair tasks, I have made a point of keeping them together, particularly where I could see this would be helpful to a student with less English. Additionally, I have taken every opportunity to ask students to teach us all key words and phrases in their home languages. This has really engaged and encouraged students by placing them as experts and acknowledging their pre-existing language skills. As an

extension of this idea, I asked my students to co-write a song with me to perform at a Refugee Week community event. In addition to telling their collective migration stories, the song contained the strong plurilingual element of a call-and-response chorus in which the students taught the audience how to say 'Hello' in each of their languages. At the end of the song, they invited the audience to do the same. In addition to this being a deeply moving and enriching shared experience for my students and many others who attended the event, it opened up a plurilingual dialogue within and beyond the classroom.

It is clear to me that, as a teacher, there is so much more I can do to embrace and promote plurilingualism within and beyond the learning space. However, after introducing these changes since my shift in perspective, I can already see enormous benefits, not the least of which is establishing a greater sense of respect for the linguistic rights of all.

### **Romila - A self-perpetuating myth**

A Malaysian of Sri Lankan-Tamil ethnicity, I'm an English language instructor at a university language centre, three years into my teaching career. I grew up speaking English as my first language (a by-product of Malaysia's British colonial past and the social class I was born into) but also spoke Malay as an additional language. I came to Australia for my undergraduate studies in 2003 and this has been home ever since.

I had always thought of myself as being a 'native' speaker of English and saw no issues with this classification. I had also assumed that all language learners both desired and should be taught to achieve similar levels of proficiency. When I had to actually reflect on my views of language for the subject Teaching English Internationally however, I became aware that I had been an unconscious subscriber to standard language ideology and a monolingual perspective for language instruction. While I was proud of the fact that I was a member of the native speaker 'club', ironically, I was of the view, as highlighted by Tollefson (2000), that outer circle/periphery varieties of English, like my own Malaysian English, were inferior in comparison to inner circle varieties like British and Australian English. I also didn't see the value in the diverse linguistic resources that my students brought with them and the role they could play in facilitating language learning. I was stuck in my view of the idealised native speaker model.

I give you this background to illustrate how influential and pervasive language ideology can be on one's identity and

teaching methodology. As a result of those perspectives, and a belief in the usage-based and maximum exposure theories for aiding acquisition, I consistently tried to enforce an 'English-only' policy in the classroom. This varied between gentle verbal reminders of 'Try to speak English please,' to abrupt chides and a variety of punitive punishments. The worst iteration of the punishments was one that allowed a student to choose to stand outside the classroom for five minutes wearing a sign that pronounced what they had done (figure 2). The idea was they would feel so embarrassed from the public humiliation that they would rethink any future use of their L1 in class.

Suffice to say, I only ever used this once and now cringe in embarrassment at the level of ignorance I displayed in using this tactic. Looking back, I realise I was treating my adult learners like misbehaving children and running the risk of my students' associating 'English with indelible feelings of exclusion and penalization' (Canagarajah, 1999, p. 126). I simply didn't have the insight into a plurilingual perspective then that I do now.

Teachers need to recognise the burden of responsibility we have in guiding learners and how imperative it is to be continually critiquing one's own practice. As a result of my newfound awareness of plurilingualism, I now walk into my classrooms with a completely different attitude. While I naturally encourage as much target language use as possible, students are no longer admonished for using their L1, and their local languages and backgrounds are valued for the learning affordances they can provide. Essentially, I have learned to have better respect for and appreciate the linguistic diversity that surrounds us, both my own and my students'.

### **Kailin - Why not?**

I have been learning about plurilingual perspectives for some time in Julie's lectures. One day, I asked Julie if she could help me think through some ideas I had for an upcoming assignment on creating a lesson plan for English language learners in China. I started by recalling all the ideas I came up with. 'Well, first, I thought it would be quite interesting to connect the language features to the topic of gender and sexual identities, but...No. Better not do it, and my sec...' Before I could finish my word, Julie jumped in: 'Why not?'

I was disturbed by this question. The reason to turn down the initial idea seemed quite obvious to me. Although I'm personally interested in the topic and would like

*I spoke Chinese in class.*

*I must try harder to speak English only in class.*



**Figure 2: Punitive teaching**

to promote an inclusive environment, opening up this discussion runs too many risks as gender and sexual issues are generally avoided in Chinese schools. I also didn't see the relevance of discussing such social issues in language learning classrooms. Language classes are about focusing on developing students' abilities to use linguistic features correctly so that they can successfully communicate with others. Discussing social issues would be a secondary concern. However, Julie's rhetorical 'why not' made me pause and rethink the possibility of implementing the idea. I began reading various ideas captured within the plurilingual perspective very carefully, trying to work out for myself, how to think differently about my assumptions of what is or isn't appropriate in language education.

From a plurilingual perspective, language is not a discrete and static system, but a fluid and dynamic social process where people negotiate their own meanings with the world. Language is a way of seeing, thinking, and doing, intertwined with a range of dynamics such as identities, emotions, culture and politics. In this sense, language education should no longer be about activating standard linguistic systems, but instead, about opening learners' minds, establishing their own voices, and guiding those voices in ways they can be heard in various social contexts. I gradually came to see the meaningfulness of incorporating social issues in language learning classrooms. The goal of doing this is not to promote political or moral correctness, but as Nelson (2009) suggests, to equip learners with ways of analysing the production and negotiation of social meanings and norms. Through this process, learners become more informed to appropriate language for their own meaning-making purposes. This is how I worked out the 'why not?' question.



**Figure 3: A workaround for gender neutrality on Chinese social media**

Recently, I saw the news title above (figure 3). In Mandarin, the pronoun ‘they’ is pronounced ‘*ta men*’. In writing, ‘they’ should be written as 他 (ta) 们 (men) for a group of males, and 她 (ta) 们 (men) for a group of females. In mixed groups, the former, 他们 (ta men) should be used. However, in various social media outlets in China today, as shown in figure 3, there has been an increasing use of the Roman alphabet ‘TA’ to replace the Chinese character indicating males (他). This replacement is a move towards showing inclusiveness in terms of gender equality and gender fluidity. The result is an amalgamation of the alphabet and Chinese character (TA们) to refer to the pronoun ‘they’ in written communication among Chinese people. While I used to consider ‘TA们’ as non-standard and irrelevant to language teaching, now I can see its innovativeness, and the value of bringing it up in a language class so that students can become aware of the changing social context, the connotations of different pronoun usages, and to think critically about language itself.

### Coming to realise, rethink, and reimagine through plurilingual perspectives

Monica and Jodie’s contributions demonstrate realisation of an aspect of their practice that they didn’t know was missing. They question the inclusivity of their teaching spaces and overlooked opportunities to fully support their students’ identity development. In Romila’s journey, she rethinks her unexamined ideological practices towards language and the potential ramifications these practices have on students’ linguistic identities and their learning trajectories. Kailin begins to see possibilities in and beyond language through her newfound understandings of thinking about the concept of language differently.

She is starting to reimagine the possibilities for a critical language education.

While there are undoubtedly many components to coming to these realisations and transformations, these testimonies show how learning about plurilingual perspectives can have powerful effects in opening up all kinds of meaningful possibilities in teacher education. As teachers who are passionate about linguistic diversity and social justice, we believe it is our responsibility to reimagine and recreate an inclusive environment. Through scholarly activities of reading and writing we are learning to reflect and reflexively work out what we think and how to think. Through collegial conversations, we are learning to listen, to *really* listen, into the spaces of our differences and coming to respect our individual interpretations. Through collaborative writing, in a platform such as the one we are writing for here, we are continuing to learn about how to achieve textual connections that not only give voice to our stories but also engage us in what it means to be doing what Cummins (2000) calls ‘transformative pedagogy’, that is, we are experiencing firsthand what ‘interactions between educators and students that attempt to foster collaborative relations of power’ (p. 246) look like and can do in practice.

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# Bridging the divide: empowering Karen learners through a funds of knowledge approach

by Amanda Hiorth



In a former life, I was an EAL/D (English as an additional language and/or dialect) teacher at an intensive English language school in metropolitan Melbourne. The purpose of the school is to prepare newly arrived students with the skills and language necessary to enable success in mainstream secondary school or further education in Australia. It is a formidable task considering that Victorian government funding to remain in the language school is limited to six or sometimes twelve months, and students with refugee backgrounds have deeply varying experiences of prior schooling and first language literacy. Herein lies the ‘divide’ that must be bridged. The divide is a multitude of gaps, problems, questions and concerns language and literacy educators often hold when attempting to best support their EAL/D learners and prepare them for the world outside the classroom. But how does one go about doing that amidst such limitations of time and resources?

My many concerns and questions as an EAL/D teacher led me into a PhD where I focused on transition: the period of movement between the language school and mainstream school, and the period of settling and integrating into formalised learning (Hiorth, 2017; Hiorth & Molyneux, 2018; Molyneux & Hiorth, forthcoming). I invited a group of ethnic Karen adolescents to participate in the study, so that in the process of learning about transition, I could also learn about the Karen community, their background and their unique learning needs in their new country. The Karen community in Australia is sizeable, with relatively significant populations in all capital cities (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

My study was a longitudinal, ethnographic case study of seven students, whom I followed over the course of one year from language school to secondary school, and was welcomed warmly into students’ and their families’ everyday lives. Although my research focuses on transition to secondary school and Karen learners specifically, these new understandings will likely resonate with other learners of similar backgrounds, and with educators of

such learners. I do not claim to have all the answers, but if I were to synthesise the essence of my research and findings, I would arrive at two pieces of advice to not only empower our language learners, but also start bridging the divide.

## 1. Get to know your student

This finding is not new information to any good teacher of any subject. In fact, under the premise of a student-centred teaching approach favoured in Australia, it is a requirement stated in Victoria’s regulatory teaching body (Victorian Institute of Teaching, 2011), the national *Professional standards for teachers* (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2018) and the *Australian language levels guidelines* (Vale, Scarino & McKay, 1991). However, for many teachers in the five schools of my research, this seemed to be a lost priority, forgotten in the attempt to manage an already significant workload.

I am sympathetic to this workload, and have experienced it myself in all of its overwhelming stress. Just keeping up and managing the many priorities expected of a teacher today is a challenging task. However, unintentional as this may be, the impact of teachers not knowing their students as individual beings full of interests, skills, abilities and experiences, can have serious consequences for students’ confidence and capacity to learn and grow. As Lisa Delpit (2006) states, when educators truly ‘see’ their students, the students feel valued and benefit from these meaningful connections. It makes sense: when you think back to the teacher who had the greatest impact on your thinking, on your learning, and on your life experiences, it is often the teacher who took the time to get to know you and see you as a person, who brought in your particular interests to new learning, and who, through doing all of this, made you believe in your ability to realise your potential. Imagine the power of this feeling for a student newly arrived in a very different country, with a very different language, few networks of support and limited knowledge of the implicit and explicit sociocultural expectations surrounding them.

It can be transformative. So in an exercise of getting to know your students and linking theory to practice, I will take a little detour and share what I learned about the Karen community and students of this study.

### **Who are the Karen?**

The Karen people are an ethnic minority group from Myanmar who make up approximately 7% of the country's population (Central Intelligence Agency, 2017). They are not Korean—as often mistaken—and certainly not Burmese, the largest ethnic group in Burma (Karen Buddhist Dhamma Dhutta Foundation [KBDDF], 2011). The Karen people are diverse in ethnicity, language, culture and religion, with three distinct ethnic sub-groups: the S'gaw (or Skaw), Pwo, and Bwe (KBDDF, 2011). Although I refer to Karen people in a homogeneous way, it is done in the recognition of no single pan-Karen identity and acknowledgment of the great diversity within the community.

### **Where have they come from?**

Since 1949, ongoing armed conflict in Burma has forced hundreds of thousands of Karen people to flee to neighbouring Thailand and establish refugee camps (Australian Karen Organisation, 2011; International Confederation of Free Trade Unions [ICFTU], 2003). I went to one of these camps, Mae La, on a field trip and life there is arduous. Residents suffer from overcrowding, disease, periodic attacks by the Burmese army, and confinement within the camp enforced by Thai soldiers. Many families have lived for decades in the camps awaiting peace in Burma for possible repatriation, which is unlikely, or resettlement to a third country—a very long waiting game. All seven students in my research were born and raised in one of these camps, hence my reason for visiting Mae La to better understand their lives prior to arriving in Australia.

### **How have they learned?**

Schooling in the refugee camps is free until secondary school and coordinated by the centralised Karen Education Department, with non-government organisations providing educational resources (ICFTU, 2003; Oh & van der Stouwe, 2008; Robinson-Pant, n.d.). School buildings are rudimentary with poor physical conditions and overcrowding (up to fifty students in a class) impacting learners' ability to concentrate and teachers' ability to teach. At times, corporal punishment is an unofficially accepted form of behaviour management (Anonymous, personal communication, January 23, 2014). Subjects taught at

secondary schools include Karen, Burmese, English, Mathematics, Geography, and History (Oh, Ochalumthan, La & Htoo, 2005), and teachers tend to use rote-style teaching methods and a transmission-style, didactic form of pedagogy (Kim & Markus, 2005).

In spite of the dedication and sacrifice of camp teachers earning meagre salaries and working in challenging conditions, many are unqualified and hold only slightly higher education levels than the level they teach (Oh et al., 2005; Robinson-Pant, n.d.). The high turnover of teachers awaiting their own opportunities for resettlement creates an ongoing demand for training, and lack of continuity in schools (Oh et al., 2005). With a lack of access to further educational pathways, vocational training or opportunity for employment, the student dropout rate is very high. Other reasons for intermittent or permanent dropout include students having to work to provide for families, unexpected pregnancies and marriage, and general learning difficulties (Oh et al., 2005).

### **What do they speak and write?**

The Karen languages are a branch of the Tibeto-Burman language family (Phillips, n.d.) and are spoken by approximately four million people (Tamaray, n.d.). S'gaw Karen is the most commonly spoken and, along with Pwo Karen, has a written orthography, a recent introduction from English-speaking missionaries. Many of the Karen languages are mutually unintelligible (Phillips, n.d.), however they do share common linguistic features which have been found to transfer into second language learning, including:

- **Lack of articles**—there are no exact counterparts in Karen (Phillips, n.d.)
- **Lack of tense**—the verb in Karen languages stand by themselves and convey no idea of time. Instead, context relays the tense of past or present (Gilmore, 1898)
- **Same word order as English**—subject, verb, object. Like English, Karen languages mainly depend on word order to express syntactical relations (Gilmore, 1898)
- **Lack of pluralisation**—plurals in Karen languages are not marked by morphemes, and nouns convey no idea of number. Number is often left to be inferred from context or the use of numbers along with the noun
- **Tones and speech sounds**—Karen languages have between four and six tones and are monosyllabic, where syllables are made up of a consonant or double consonant and a vowel (Gilmore, 1898). There are no consonant clusters, nor final consonants (Tamaray, n.d.).





**A Karen student's dream of the future**

### What do they value?

The Karen are represented in literature as being moral, honest, quiet, unassuming and peace-loving in nature (Kuroiwa & Verkuyten, 2008; Queensland Government, n.d.). Such adjectives were also evident in my research from multiple teacher comments about their Karen students. The Karen society is said to be patriarchal with women traditionally considered to be inferior to men, and hierarchical in structure where deference is shown to elders or those with higher status (Karen American Communities Foundation, n.d.; Queensland Government). The Karen are said to have great respect for education (Worland & Darlington, 2010) and to revere teachers, who are viewed as holding equal honour to monks (KBDDF, 2011).

At the core of the Karen culture lies a value of utmost importance: *annade*. Often associated with inhibition, fear, timidity, obedience, shyness and a reserved demeanour (MacLaren, McGrath & Han, 2013), *annade* expresses 'an attitude of delicacy, expressive of a solicitousness for other people's feelings or convenience' (Queensland Government, n.d., p. 13) and is demonstrated as restraint in a fear of offending. In the context of education, *annade* is relevant and visible: making direct eye contact, asking questions or disagreeing are traits considered to be confrontational, aggressive and disrespectful (Immigrant Services Society of BC, 2014). It is likely a huge shock for Karen people when first entering the Australian education system to see the way that Australian students and teachers interact.

### Why does this all matter?

Under the principle of getting to know one's students, such background information about learners provides educators with an enormous head start in building connections with their students. These types of information are deeply valuable when bridging the divide of prior knowledge and experiences, and new knowledge to be taught. Certainly, it is important to differentiate between unhelpful stereotypes and robust research, and to remain open-minded about the diversity among particular student cohorts. However, used judiciously, knowledge about one's learners can only be advantageous in teaching.

### What is the impact of not knowing one's students?

In the mainstream schools of my study, the majority of teachers had little understanding about the Karen community and Karen students in their classes. Although teachers from the language school prepared comprehensive exit reports detailing valuable information about individual students, these reports were kept in an administrative folder at the mainstream school and not passed on to teachers. Naturally, this created a void of potential knowledge that might have benefited the new teachers to focus on specific study and language skills to be developed.

Many of the secondary school teachers I interviewed for my research were surprised to learn that students were ethnically Karen, guessing they were either Filipino or from some other part of Asia, and knowledge that these students had refugee backgrounds and varied experiences of prior schooling suddenly helped them make sense of gaps in knowledge and differences in learning behaviours when compared to Australian-born, fluent English-speaking peers. While all of the mainstream teachers stated that their Karen students were a delight to have in their classroom as they never made a fuss and were always so polite and respectful, this also meant that students' needs were routinely overlooked and their learning subsequently stunted.

The cultural presentation of *annade* was evident when learners were hesitant to ask questions or request help, and families felt unable to advocate for their children even when it was so desperately needed. This behaviour was instead perceived by teachers to mean that no problems existed, and students and families required no further support. Students were indeed slipping through the cracks. The consequences of not knowing one's students can lead not only to the hindering of language and learning development, but also become a serious issue of inequity in education.

## 2. Utilise a funds of knowledge approach

Getting to know one's students and their backgrounds generates a foundation of knowledge for a wonderful head start in teaching. The next step is to utilise a funds of knowledge approach to find out more about individual learners and the resources they bring to learning.

### What are funds of knowledge?

'Funds of knowledge' is a concept developed by González, Moll and Amanti (2005), whose work explores the different types of knowledge which are often overlooked in education systems in preference for dominant ways of knowing and doing. Thomson (2002) refers to a similar concept called 'virtual schoolbags', a metaphor for how learners 'carry' cultural knowledge and dispositions from lifeworlds into learning. In essence, it affirms that no student enters into learning as a blank slate. Instead, there is a lifetime of tasks that they can already do, and resources and skills they have developed which can be utilised in rich and meaningful ways for new learning.

Mobilising students' funds of knowledge improves language and learning outcomes, and builds connections between educators and peers. When students' funds are ignored, however, their extensive knowledge is rejected and their identities denied (Moll, Soto-Santiago & Schwartz, 2013; Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2012). Imagine the experience of sitting down in a new class, having to speak a new language and understand a new way of being, yet being told in explicit or implicit ways that all you have learned and come to know is either incorrect or irrelevant.

The impact of denying students their funds of knowledge can be devastating for engagement in learning, language development, settling into a new mode of learning and even inclusion into wider society (Alikhan, 2016; Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2007; Humphrey & Ainscow, 2006). Reframing the lens to an additive perspective in utilising this approach is therefore imperative when it comes to valuing and empowering our learners.

### How can we mobilise learners' funds?

Let us return to the seven Karen students of the case study to exemplify how their unique funds of knowledge can be mobilised in learning. Over the course of the ethnographic research, I accumulated a plethora of data detailing the students' individual—and collective—funds. When determining these funds, I extended the definition beyond its original concept (Moll & Greenberg, 1990; Wolf, 1966) to encompass resources which are not merely cognitive, but also those enriched by assets of social, affective and cultural knowledge and experiences (Conteh, Begum & Riasat, 2014). I therefore redefine funds of knowledge as any type of skill, resource, network, ability or capacity, which enables students to learn or show evidence of prior learning. Following a rigorous process of analysis (employing Moll & Greenberg, 1990 and Wolf, 1966's analytic design), I coded the funds into six discrete categories (table 1).

These six categories of funds have potential utility for educators in a multitude of ways, for example, to be used as a frame to audit the funds of knowledge of

**Table 1: The six categories of funds**

Fund of Knowledge	Definition
Interpersonal Network	Students' personal social group who can provide support, knowledge, skills and resources—may include but is not limited to friends, family members, members from the ethnic community or wider community, and religious affiliations
Academic Capacities	Students' strengths in curricular learning areas, including all prior schooling experiences and study skills
Linguistic Capacities	Students' ability to speak languages additional to English and their multilingual literacy skills
Sociocultural Skills	Students' social skills and ability to interact with others—includes their intercultural experiences and understandings, cultural characteristics common to their own cultural group, and their overall worldview and world experiences
Unique Abilities	Students' skills, capacities and abilities unique to each individual, including individual modes of self-expression and other skills not easily classified into other categories
Personal Characteristics	Students' personalities, their character and traits, and strengths from prior life experiences

**Table 2: Mobilising students' funds to develop language and literacy**

Students' funds of knowledge	Ways to mobilise students' funds
<i>Interpersonal Network</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Extensive international network of Karen community friends/family</li> <li>Members of local church community</li> <li>Family highly supportive of education and study, encouraging to do daily homework</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Connect with international Karen community online to share experiences of life in other English-speaking countries</li> <li>Invite Karen community members to co-design unit/lesson or present in class</li> <li>Engage family members in home learning by assigning family-oriented homework tasks</li> </ul>
<i>Academic Capacities</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Excellent spelling and rote memorisation</li> <li>Maintain glossary of new English vocab learned</li> <li>Experiences of prior schooling</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Regular spelling tests of new vocabulary so students have opportunity to experience success in learning</li> <li>Targeted activities to use new vocabulary in context to assess comprehension and scaffold towards deeper and meaningful use of language</li> <li>Ascertain effective study skills/strategies from prior schooling and incorporate into teaching for all students to have a collective repertoire of culturally-responsive study skills</li> </ul>
<i>Linguistic Capacities</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Oral fluency in multiple languages (Karen, Karenni, Pwo Karen, Thai, Burmese)</li> <li>First language literacy</li> <li>Daily use of multiple languages employing all macroskills (eg family, social networking, online Karen news, local library)</li> <li>Competent digital literacy skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Utilise students' plurilinguistic abilities to scaffold comprehension</li> <li>Involve Multicultural Education Aide or community members in multilingual team-teaching</li> <li>Use first language (or language of choice) for story-telling or caption writing of comics</li> <li>Exchange plurilingual literacy practices and build literacy skills bank to share with all class members</li> <li>Encourage continued use of all known languages; communicate value to families</li> <li>Use authentic texts from Internet to explore different genres of writing and pragmatics of language online</li> </ul>
<i>Sociocultural Skills</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Love of music, dancing and singing</li> <li>Pride in Karen cultural identity</li> <li>Knowledge of Karen history, cultural origin story and mythology</li> <li>Eager curiosity to learn about other cultures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Activities based on song lyrics and linguistic expression in music across different languages</li> <li>Position students as experts of their own cultural knowledge and integrate into teaching</li> <li>Enquiry-based learning to explore various cultural identities e.g. Indigenous; compare and contrast to the Karen experience</li> </ul>
<i>Unique Abilities</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Highly dexterous; fine motor skills</li> <li>Artistic, enjoy drawing</li> <li>Enjoy sports e.g. soccer, table tennis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Targeted language teaching through subjects requiring creativity e.g. art, textiles, woodwork, cooking</li> <li>Focus on aspects of functional grammar and develop capacity for different genres e.g. students produce procedural text to create something</li> <li>Use of visuals in teaching and assessment</li> <li>Active literacy activities, combining physical movement in language learning and language learning through physical education</li> </ul>
<i>Personal Characteristics</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Appreciative of opportunity for education</li> <li>Strong work ethic, diligent, determined to improve language skills</li> <li>Enjoy doing homework</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Involve students in co-design of assessments and criteria</li> <li>Provide students with positive feedback as role models for study behaviours</li> </ul>

individual students or the collective funds of a group of students; to scaffold students' existing skills, resources and knowledge into the teaching of new knowledge; or, to consider how students' funds might be integrated into class topics, units, assessments or even more broadly

the whole school community. If we were to focus on mobilising students' funds to develop language and literacy specifically, we could utilise this framework to determine explicit examples of learners' strengths in language across the six categories, and then work this

into planning, teaching and pedagogical methodology. To illustrate how this might be done, I have referenced some of the rich funds of the Karen students in this study and provided examples of ways educators might employ these resources to develop language and literacy across each of the categories (Table 2).

### Bridging the divide

There is no quick fix or simple solution when it comes to bridging the divide for our EAL/D students. However, the key principles presented here—getting to know one’s students and utilising a funds of knowledge approach—offer rich opportunities to begin closing the gaps. These additive models of teaching empower students by acknowledging that all they bring in their ‘virtual schoolbag’ to the learning process is valuable and a foundation for educational success. Teachers can formulate a pedagogy specific to their students’ unique needs and backgrounds that builds strategically on their cultural resources. This can be a powerful step in affirming learners’ identities to enable them to become deeply engaged as they exercise their agency in learning, the impact of which can be far-reaching for wider engagement in Australian society (Dickie, 2011). Many teachers come into the profession hoping to make a difference to students’ lives: these principles, drawn from evidence-based research, provide educators a way to connect with learners in dynamic, creative and flexible ways that can have a profound impact on learners.

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# Practical Matters

## A wealth of language learning

By Felix Chapple

**The success of an ELICOS project-based course prompted a closer look at the learning and teaching approaches that made it work despite a tight time frame.**

ELICOS students encounter many challenges and often this is their first time away from family and home. Course design needs to accomplish social-emotional as well as academic outcomes. The quality of design and learning outcomes of these five-week courses should include developing self-confidence and fostering supportive and constructive networks, while stimulating students' enthusiasm and motivation to learn and pursue pathways to further study or employment.

Some of the practical issues in delivering ELICOS program courses include: maintaining student attendance levels, maintaining and fostering a positive respectful class dynamic among a diverse range of nationalities, ages and personalities, and managing technological issues when attempting to deliver a course that reflects the current prevalence of digital devices in all areas of life.

The role of the ELICOS teacher is to empower the students and give them confidence to study, learn and live in their new, very different environment. The teaching challenges lie in facilitating learning and progress in language proficiency through interesting, creative and engaging classes. A major obstacle is the delivery of a course that captures and maintains the students' attention for five hours per day, five days per week and for up to forty weeks.

### Course design

In my role as a classroom teacher to international language learners, I am the main point of contact for the students from different nationalities, backgrounds and age groups. I aim to build a safe learning environment in which respect for individuality and diversity is encouraged. Students are required to work in pairs and groups. Embracing difference is part of their educational experience. The students are enabled by being given the opportunity to practise English language skills in a multicultural environment. Using group project work as a starting point the students are encouraged by their peers.



In my role as coordinating teacher for the upper-intermediate class, I was charged with the task of delivering a course with the genre of 'process' as the main theme. I designed a five-week course in which small groups of students were divided into production companies with each group assigned to produce a film to entertain the whole ELICOS student body at an end-of-course film gala event. The group project work encouraged and inspired students to demonstrate their language abilities and exhibit their individual and group talents.

Macro skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing were all practised and developed in the context of student collaboration in conceptualising, storyboarding, scripting, rehearsing, filming and editing each group's film production. Part of the project also involved marketing the films with posters and Q&A sessions at the gala event.

The students were highly motivated in their response to this holistic approach to language learning. There was a great sense of achievement as they completed each task in the process of producing their film. The project involved using video editing software and students exercised problem solving skills as they navigated the software. I had to do considerable preparation in learning new software and introducing students to Adobe Media Encoder when they had to convert their raw video files to compatible formats. Students used digital devices to share footage and save work in progress. Within a tight five-week time frame each group was able to complete a final finished film, a result that reflected the weeks of intensive practice and recycling of language in real contexts.

### Film project overview

The ELICOS curriculum is divided into four blocks of five weeks. During the third of these blocks, students learn the language of 'process', a genre which includes directions, instructions, describing processes, sequencing



**A proud production team**

and various structural and grammatical features relevant to the students' language level. The project-based approach takes an integrated holistic view of the course and generates various tasks that enable the students to practise a variety of skills. In fact, the students are learning and practising all the time as they have a common goal to achieve by the end of the course.

The film project required the students to work in groups (production companies) comprising four students each. The production companies were comprised of students from different language backgrounds, therefore accurate and effective English language communication was imperative.

Adapting a mystery story theme from the textbook, *Cutting edge*, I designed a task which was 'to create a film from Title and Concept to finished product using Movie Maker'.

The tasks were to be completed over the ensuing five weeks, culminating with a celebratory film gala event for the whole of ELICOS program. The timeline was as follows:

- Week 1: Come up with a concept (title, story, situation)  
Write the basic story.
- Week 2: Write a storyboard of the scenes you need to shoot. Create a short screenplay. Think about locations.
- Week 3: Rehearse and workshop your film performance.  
Shoot your film.
- Week 4.: Edit your film in Moviemaker.
- Week 5: Write a report on your film project. Give an oral report to your teacher. Show your film to the class.

The students were extremely excited and motivated when they were presented with this project and with each of

the four production companies there was an element of competition.

### **Target language input and practice**

Students were provided with worksheets and task sheets at every stage of the process. The language of process was presented, practised and reinforced through classroom presentation, and the continuous drafting of a written report by each student on how they carried out the project. This gave the students the opportunity to reflect on their work and practise the language of process.

For example, Unit 9 in their *Cutting edge* textbook introduces modal expressions such as 'must', 'have to', and 'should' which are all expressions that were necessary to use in their reports. The draft report was corrected by the teacher and later the students had to do a timed writing of the report for their assessment. The final oral and listening assessment interview in Week 5 was also related to a recount of how the students completed their task.

To exemplify how the project facilitated real use of target language we can see that it was necessary for the students to communicate particular aspects of the task to one another. In the planning stages they needed to express possibilities and necessities, therefore such utterances as, 'We might need to...', 'I think we have to...' were used. In the reflection stages of the process where plans were modified and at the end when a report on the process was required, utterances such as, 'We should have...', 'We needed to...', 'We didn't have to...' were practised and used. The ongoing-project nature of the learning task produced ongoing opportunities to reinforce and practise language in real contexts.

### **Technological problem solving**

The students were guided through every stage of the process, however, each group found its own way of solving specific problems. Each problem was a learning experience for the group and occasionally different groups collaborated when they found a solution to a problem and so ideas were constantly shared and communicated. For example, the students had some trouble with the Movie Maker software. A student from one group found a solution to this problem and shared it with the class.

Students' mobile phones were used to shoot the raw footage of each story-boarded and rehearsed scene. These files were then uploaded to each production company's project folder. We found that the footage

from the iPhones was in the form of .MOV files and not compatible with Microsoft Windows Movie Maker, so students had to go through the process of converting files to .AVI. We found Adobe Media Encoder in the Software Centre on each desktop and used this to convert the unedited files to a compatible format. In subsequent video related projects other classes have used alternative video editing apps; however, for teaching and project management purposes it is preferable for students to all be using the same software. Hence, the employment of the more primitive Movie Maker software available in the computer labs.

The students demonstrated a great deal of creativity and drive in completing this project. They were proud of their work and were keen in their organising of the final film gala showing. They made posters to advertise the event and other students from the cohort joined them for the final viewing with food and drinks provided.

### **Film gala showing**

The whole of ELICOS shared in the students' joys and accomplishments at the film gala event when everyone assembled, dressed in finery and offering their most delicious foods, on the last day of the course. Elementary to advanced level students came together to celebrate each other's diverse achievements and to practise once again their ever developing English language, literacy and multimodal communication skills. Validation of the project and learning outcomes came in the form of the proud showing of each team's film and the enthusiastic response from students and staff and the comments and recommendations in their final reports.

The recommendations related to logistical and practical solutions to the completion of the project. Individual reflections indicated that the students continued to be engaged even after completing the project. The creation of real texts, generated by their own efforts, meant that they had tangible evidence of their progress which they could measure against the project timeline.

### **Outcomes**

All of the students in Class 4 Upper-Intermediate successfully completed the course. At the end of the semester some of the students went into mainstream courses at Melbourne Polytechnic, some of the students continued in the ELICOS program through second semester. The students who continued in the program eventually completed advanced level statements of attainment.

My own learning was extended by online learning to prepare for presenting the course to the students. I used online tutorials to learn how to use the Movie Maker and Adobe Media Encoder digital film-making and editing software. My Melbourne Polytechnic colleagues were inspired to develop similar projects for subsequent student cohorts, which were equally successful and enthusiastically embraced. The students gained a great deal of confidence and awareness both in using English in a practical and collaborative setting and in employing and exploring digital technology with English as the medium of communication. These are highly transferable skills as they embark upon further vocational training, higher education and various careers.

### **Creative inspiration**

The project based approach I have adopted synergises elements from a range of disciplines including artistic production, theatre and cinema. I drew on my work outside teaching as a professional musician to enhance the design of creative English language programs. My lifelong study and practice of music, alongside collaboration with other artists in the production, recording and performance of music, strongly influence me to seek creative outlets for my students in their exploration and development of English language skills. The project offered students the opportunity to practice language in a real context rather than the typical controlled classroom practice of role-play and prescribed situations. The students' creative collaborations required real communication. Furthermore, the creative enterprise gave bloom to numerous types of texts through which the students were able to express their own creativity: synopsis, screenplay, storyboard, rehearsal, production meetings, and editing discussions.

In the design and implementation of a five-week English language course, I transformed my initial professional learning about project based course planning into a demonstration of its benefits to all ELICOS students and teachers. The ideas of David Nunan (1999; 2016) on project based language learning, and Rodney Jones' (2012) explorations into creativity and language use, have influenced me to explore and experiment with creativity in language teaching further. I have attempted to apply the independent project based learning approach with other classes subsequent to the course. The project is highly transferable and adaptable to any given level or cohort. Both staff and students were inspired by this project.

**Continued on page 38 ...**



# Foreign Correspondent

## Transforming lives

by Dr Vicky Duckworth

The Further Education in England: Transforming Lives and Communities research project commissioned by the University and College Union (<http://transforminglives.web.ucu.org.uk/>) and led by me and Dr Rob Smith from Birmingham City University, aims to understand and provide evidence of how the further education sector is vital in transforming lives and communities in twenty-first century Britain. The project provides learners, teachers, family members and communities with the opportunity to tell and share their stories, linking the distinctness of further education to the impact it has on individuals, society and the economy.

### The sector

In the United Kingdom, FE (further education) is an umbrella term that describes learning taking place mainly outside of school environments and largely shaped by historical, industrial and social factors closely related to the local socioeconomic circumstances in different towns and cities across the UK. In the UK, FE encompasses a considerable range of learners who differ in a number of ways, including, for example, age, aspirations, subjects of study and purpose of study. People may undertake FE courses, which have traditional academic and vocational routes, with the aim of developing the skills needed for a career change, to re-enter the labour market after redundancy, or to progress to higher education or higher level training. A further dimension of FE is that learning can be delivered in a college-based environment and in the workplace. Indeed, over the last decade apprenticeships have re-emerged as a way of mixing these two elements in dynamic ways. People may also undertake FE courses for pleasure and fulfilment, for example art or creative writing classes. Community learning is an important part of the FE system which includes adult literacy/numeracy and English as a Second or Other Language classes. More recently, some colleges are also delivering higher education.

### Methodology

The FE in England: Transforming Lives and Communities project utilised a digitally embedded research methodology to gather, explore and share project data. The data comprised a series of rich narratives from learners,



teachers, employers and learners' family members. These were collected through video recorded interviews which were then shared via a project website. A YouTube channel (FE Transforms) and twitter account (@FEtransforms) were further features of an inter-related and multi-faceted digital platform that was used to build a project audience and an interactive critical space which garnered further contributions in the form of written narratives, photographs and artefacts. This digital platform was used to grow a wider project audience to participate in a collaborative way by contributing to the data. The aim here was to catalyse what we describe as 'virtually enhanced engagement' in order to constitute a 'thirdspace' (Soja 1996) that is, a space in which further education could effectively be reimagined, through a collective dialogical interaction of practitioners and students as *more than* the quantitatively-defined abstract space that current further education policy discourse reifies. This interactive dimension extended the influence of the project and constructed new and alternative meanings in the public domain. It also facilitated engagement with policy makers and led to additional opportunities for public dissemination and speaking back and to the development of policy.

### The backdrop

Functional literacy and numeracy in this context was considered to be synonymous with the ability to read, write and speak in English and use mathematics at a level necessary to function at work and in society in general. The resulting strategy, Skills for Life, identified a number of priority groups which included people who live in disadvantaged communities (DfEE 2001). In its local implementation, the Skills for Life agenda took a more instrumental approach to adult literacy than,

for example, a critical pedagogy model (see Giroux 1997; Lankshear and McClaren 1993; Lankshear 1993; Shor 1992; Duckworth 2013; Ade-Ojo & Duckworth 2015; Duckworth & Smith 2018), which challenges autonomous prescriptive approaches to curriculum designs that do not take into account the history or background and needs of learners. This was typified by the way the 'core curriculum' became a matrix for assessment and progression and thereby, a vehicle for standardisation that structured learning so it more closely aligned to the autonomous model of literacy. Arguably, because of the pre-eminence of this agenda, a dominant focus in the discourse on adult literacy in the last decade or so has been the issue of perceptions of literacy.

The emergent question for us in the context of the study is: how does further education influence and inform an engagement with adult literacy for often marginalised learners? In effect, the aim of this research is to track the effectiveness of a curriculum and engagement process informed by an alternative perception of literacy and critical literacy, in engaging and facilitating learners whose experiences have been impacted by barriers which, for example, include negative experiences of compulsory education and cultural issues where attendance in compulsory education settings was not viewed as important in the family and community context.

### **Listening to the voices of learners**

Listening to participants' life stories provided insights into the transformative impact of further education for them and on their lives; it also illuminated the ripple impact on family and community. This often also involved us listening to participants recounting negative experiences of schooling. These research conversations were collaborative in the sense that not only were stories shared, but new understandings were generated for everyone involved. For the research team, participants' stories provided important insights into the factors that facilitated transformative teaching and learning; for participants, these dialogical research conversations involved a re-telling that culminated in an affirmation of the new learner identities and shedding of spoilt identities, for example through the symbolic violence of being labelled, and the affirmation and reclaiming of the new learner identities based on agency and self-respect. The discussions also, more broadly, fostered a growing awareness of social and historical factors that had shaped their experience of education to date (Duckworth & Smith, 2018).

David, a participant from a Traveller background, spoke about his motivations for learning as being able to read to his four-year-old daughter. Claiming literacy was also a catalyst for David to take part in our democratic processes.

Now I can actually read and write and sign my own name. When I go to the doctor, I can sign a note... You need education to know what's going on outside: the politics and all that. I'd never voted in my life, ever. I read the thing that came through the letterbox and I voted for the first time. <http://transforminglives.web.ucl.ac.uk/2017/09/22/david/>

Jade is a mother who attends adult literacy classes. Being a mum motivated her and she has seen her confidence increase while studying and has learned new literacies. Now, she has aspirations for her future and is determined to be the best possible role model for her son. Jade's story can be accessed on the project YouTube channel where she tells her story of literacy and empowerment.

Jade's story and other learners' narratives expose the complexities they experience in their daily lives and how they try to make sense of them from their structural positioning as literacy learners in a society based on inequality of opportunity and choice.

By revisiting their own stories of learning and not learning, rather than keeping them hidden in shame, these project participants took ownership of them. They reclaimed them as stories of success, recognising the structural inequalities they have challenged and resisted to become empowered to take agency in their lives. Jade, a single mother in her early twenties, who left school to work in unskilled jobs that paid a 'pittance to live on', moved from North Manchester after the birth of her son to her own flat in Rochdale, where she 'loved being a mother' and 'wanted so much more' for her son. David, from a Traveller community, a married man in his thirties with children, had not attended compulsory education regularly from the age of eight and instead spent the days working with his father as a manual labourer. Both were labelled by school teachers as being 'thick' and 'stupid'. In their view, the deficit labelling was due to their struggle with literacy and for David it was a double deficit lens, being part of the Traveller community.

### **Empowerment**

The project brought into sharp focus how literacy and empowerment are reflected in the emotions, knowledge, practices and skills of the participants and act as a catalyst

to their agency in political engagement, including voting for the first time and taking part in voluntary work and community activism.

Recognising and addressing the power of education to reproduce rather than challenge social inequality offers a framework for understanding learners' narrative accounts of their educational and personal journeys against the backdrop of the structural inequalities they have faced. Importantly, while these narratives might connect with employment and/or career progression, they are not defined by this. Rather, they are the core to personal development, the enhancement of student agency and hope and they are underpinned by the primacy of human dignity and the rich flow of this into students' families and communities. They act against the instrumentalist turn and in the place of the 'choice' offered by market fundamentalist policies, offer a choice rooted in students' enhanced agency both in their personal and public trajectories (Duckworth & Smith, 2018).

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The UCU FE transforming Lives and Communities research project is on twitter @FETransforms. The webpage is at: <http://transforminglives.web.ucu.org.uk/about-this-project/>

# Open Forum

## Join the discussion

by Libby Barker

In August this year, the State Government of Victoria published the *Future opportunities for adult learners in Victoria: pathways to participation and jobs* discussion paper. The paper raised a number of issues in relation to concerns about low rates of literacy, numeracy and vocational skills in Victoria and proposed a number of solutions inviting feedback from stakeholders.

Having started my career in adult community education as an English as an additional language and adult literacy teacher, and now managing education programs, both state and federal, within a Learn Local, I was interested in the solutions being proposed within the paper.

From the perspective of an adult literacy provider and a Learn Local, there are particular solutions which could result in genuine opportunities for learners and the sector as a whole. However, I have concerns in regards to the potential impact of some of the solutions proposed in the paper.

Overall, the discussion paper posed thirty questions across three themes:

1. Ensuring the adult community education sector has sufficient scale and capability to meet the needs of learners, including those who are at risk and/or have high needs
2. Ensuring the adult community education system is strongly oriented towards jobs and industry
3. Ensuring Victoria has a cohesive, collaborative adult community education system, with strong connections between adult community education and the mainstream training system (Department of Education and Training, 2018).

As it is not possible here for me to address all of these questions, I have selected three to discuss in more detail in order to illustrate how they may impact our sector and, by default, our learners.

The first question I will address is the proposition that pre-accredited courses, delivered by Learn Locals, encompass work placements for learners that are covered through government insurance. This would be a real



opportunity to assist learners in developing transferable industry skills and would increase their chances of gaining employment. Organisations that are also Registered Training Organisations or who have been able to provide work/practical placements as part of pre-accredited learning would agree that the experience is critical for students attempting to make the transition from the classroom to the workplace. Not only does it enable students to put into practice the skills they have learnt in the classroom, it assists in the development of employability skills and builds connections with employers.

The second question I would like to discuss is the suggestion that learner capability kits be used for the purpose of providing a benchmark measure of learner progress. I feel there are several issues in using learner capability assessment kits that need more investigation before such a change is implemented. The first relates to the nature of low literacy and numeracy learners, as described in the discussion paper, where learners 'may have low self-esteem, non-educational barriers to engagement such as mental health or displacement, and may have had a poor prior experience of education institutions' (Department of Education and Training, 2018, p. 17). Presenting such students with more assessment may well have the effect of disengaging the very cohort we aim to engage. Furthermore, being able to pin-point a learner's capability will not necessarily result in progress without improvements in teacher resourcing. Ideally, a teacher needs to have access to the latest literacy teaching research and methodologies, learning disability diagnoses and associated strategies or a range of tuition models for best meeting individuals' needs. Learn Locals are funded for classroom tuition only, and while they have done a remarkable job in progressing students' literacy skills,

teaching staff (currently paid the lowest teaching rates in the state) cannot be expected to provide an individual program on current funding levels.

In addition, there is a risk that diagnostic kits may become used for measuring progression to the point that teaching and learning actually become secondary. There has been much discussion around the amount of reporting of progression in the Adult Migrant English Program and Skills for Education and Employment programs. Reporting progression against the Australian Core Skills Framework as well as curriculum assessment means that teachers are spending more time on assessment reporting. It is important to question how this is impacting their time for developing classroom materials and teaching strategies. As summarised in the Neighbourhood Houses Victoria and Adult Learning Australia's response to the discussion paper:

Historically, generic assessment tools have failed to meet the needs and capacities of people with very low levels of literacy. However, highly individualised formative approaches may offer a way for adult educators to assess progress and adjust their teaching and learning strategies to better meet the learners' needs.

In reality, the key feature of a high quality assessment process is a sufficiently qualified, autonomous adult literacy educator. (2018, p. 3)

The final question I wish to address is that of 'building excellence in the adult community education teaching workforce' (Department of Education and Training, 2018, p.33). One solution proposed by the discussion paper is to introduce a minimum teaching standard for the purposes of 'describing and benchmarking [a] practitioner's skills' and providing 'a baseline level for pre-accredited teaching skills and competencies' (Department of Education and Training, 2018, p.33). Establishing a minimum teaching standard alone will not improve capability and consistency in the adult community education workforce. A structure supporting organisations to focus on developing an organisational culture of professional learning or growth, combined with the means for organisations to support teachers to engage in professional learning and development must also be provided.

Having familiarity with minimum teaching standards in the accredited VET sector, I would argue that imposing

the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment as the minimum teaching standard for the accredited VET sector has not necessarily resulted in improvement of teaching practice, and nor, by extension, student outcomes. It would be interesting to undertake a study that compares the VET sector approach of auditing teachers' skills matrices, with the approach to improving teacher capability in the school sector. The school sector approach is underpinned by the Australian Teacher Performance and Development Framework, the purpose of which is to lead schools in the establishment of a culture of performance and development. The Australian Teacher Performance and Development Framework identifies a culture of effective performance and development as having:

- a focus on student outcomes
- a clear understanding of what effective teaching is, based on the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers
- flexibility to respond to unique contexts and histories
- leadership from all levels
- coherence with school, system and national approaches to teaching and learning. (AITSL, 2012)

In conclusion, *Future opportunities for adult learners in Victoria: pathways to participation and jobs* has presented some interesting ideas addressing those challenges that the government has identified with low rates of literacy, numeracy and vocational skills in Victoria. With the extensive experience and wide range of expertise currently in the adult education sector it is critical that each and every one of us engages in the discussions begun by this paper. Even though the deadline for submissions in response to the discussion paper has passed, I would encourage you to consider the solutions raised in the paper and how these may impact your practice from the point of view of your learners, staff and organisation, and begin to engage in professional conversations with regard to how we, as a sector, believe adult community education should be shaped.

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Libby Barker is the Education Manager at PRACE (Preston Reservoir Adult Community Education) and

the Principal of PRACE College. Having worked in a range of roles in the adult education sector over the last twenty-five years Libby has developed a broad range of skills and knowledge related to both accredited and pre-accredited education in a not-for-profit environment. She has extensive knowledge of compliance requirements but her true passion is providing life changing educational experiences for people in the local community. Her commitment to disadvantaged learners in the community continues to drive all aspects of her work at PRACE. Libby has a Diploma of Education in TESOL and English, a Certificate in Adult Literacy Teaching and is currently completing her Masters in Educational Leadership.

## Learn Local Awards

by Linno Rhodes

The Victorian Learn Local Awards are held annually by the ACFE (Adult, Community and Further Education) Board. The 2018 Victorian Learn Local Awards recognise the inspirational efforts of learners, practitioners and training providers in the Learn Local education and training network.

One of my favourite 'work events' of the year is attending the Learn Local Awards Night and this year didn't disappoint.

The venue was the Pullman Hotel, which I was very pleased about as it was just a short train ride away for me and I arrived right on time. Of course I arrived in time for an event starting at 7:00 at the Pullman in Jolimont but if your event happened to be in Albert Park, well then, you're late, aren't you? One very stressy taxi ride later, I puffed in to the Pullman Albert Park ballroom to find that the seating fairies had been very kind to me and placed me right up front. Now this is akin to the Logies or the Brownlows if you like, so I thought I may be getting a gong for having attended the most Learn Local Awards nights to date.

No such gong was presented. I was, however, seated with some of Minister for Training and Skills Gayle Tierney's staff, Jenny Macaffer from Adult Learning Australia,



and a couple of people from the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority—I thoroughly enjoyed the company and we had lots to talk about. And I did manage to meet the Minister and put a copy or two of *Fine Print* in her hands.

Some years there are a few additions or deletions from the award categories—this year we had the first Victorian Learn Local Collaboration Award, which was taken out by *Manningham Learns*, a strategic alliance of five neighbourhood houses in Melbourne's east. The other inaugural award was the Young Pre-Accredited Learner Award. Aymee Schofield from Sale went home with the prize there. She attended the awards with her mother, step father and brother, and it was her brother who accompanied her on stage to receive her award from Minister Tierney. I had an opportunity to interview Aymee, which you can view on VALBEC's Facebook page. Aymee gained a

full-time traineeship at the Sale hospital after completing a pre-accredited course at Noweyung.

Each of the eight ACFE regional councils nominate a Learn Local organisation they consider to be an example of excellence and a champion of the Learn Local sector. PRACE (Preston Reservoir Adult Community Education) was nominated by the North Western Metropolitan Regional Council of ACFE to receive the Learn Local Legend award. Libby Barker said how excited they were to be nominated as a Learn Local Legend and to have a finalist in the category of Learner of the Year. The Learn Local Facebook page has a comprehensive list of finalists and winners (<https://www.facebook.com/learnlocal/>)

The highlight for me is always the Ro Allen Award, which recognises the Pre-accredited Learner of the Year. David Hayes from Kew Neighbourhood Learning Centre was the winner this year. It is so important to recognise that the learners who attend Learn Locals and Neighbourhood Houses are not just learning skills, they are developing their social capital and often addressing other issues such as mental health.

One aspect I love about attending the awards is the opportunity to meet regional Learn Local reps. This year I spoke with Monica and Lisa from Stawell Neighbourhood House. What really interests me when I speak with the

... continued from page 31

The overarching methodology in this project was a communicative student centred approach with a project task as the motivating goal used to engage students. Once the students were set up in their production companies they took control of the process, with the teacher providing language input and instruction sheets during specified lessons. Another positive aspect of the methodology was the healthy competition engendered by the teams. Each team inspired the others with their unique approach to the basic framework of the task. In fact, the students were learning and practising the target language and grammar forms all the time as they worked towards achieving their authentic common goal by the end of the course. Collaborative projects provide a wealth of learning that occurs when people work together creatively.

regional Learn Locals is the breadth of courses these small centres run. They made the most of the trip to Melbourne by attending the Learn Local conference earlier in the day.

Jesuit Social Services' participants, The Travellers, provided the entertainment. A beautiful version of Leonard Cohen's 'Hallelujah' was certainly a crowd stopper, everyone halting their conversations and turning stage-ward to take in the harmonies of Clement Wetnhiak and Angelo Duot. To know that these two gifted young men started their lives in a refugee camp before coming to Australia as young boys, just proves the words of Dr Ron Wilson, ACFE Board Acting Chairperson:

The Learn Local network makes a significant contribution to Victoria. It delivers the skills that support our economy and that underpin the social cohesion of our communities.

I hope to see you next year at the Learn Local Awards. In the meantime, please drop by the VALBEC Facebook page to see interviews from the night and other up-to-date and relevant news: <https://www.facebook.com/valbec.org.au/>

**Linno Rhodes works at Olympic Adult Education in West Heidelberg. She has been on the *Fine Print* Editorial Committee and VALBEC committee for a number of years.**

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## Reflecting on the 2018 ACAL Conference

by Manjit Bhamral

I have made some amazing teacher friends over the years who have inspired me as an educator and have been great mentors. Among other things, I've learned from them about the importance of attending conferences. I had already registered for the Australian Council of TESOL Associations International Conference in Adelaide in October 2018 and personally funding another conference was going to be challenging financially. So when I applied and was successful in receiving a scholarship for support to attend the ACAL (Australian Council for Adult Literacy) Conference, I was delighted.

The 2018 ACAL Conference, *Learning in Diverse Communities—Strengths, Reflections, Questions*, was very interesting and inspiring. Hosted by VALBEC, it was held at the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre, set on the banks of the iconic Yarra River and followed a pre-conference event at the Library at the Dock. It was a great choice of venue as libraries play a very important role in contributing to the adult learning and literacy space. The highlight of the pre-conference event was the research being conducted towards establishing an online portal of quality curated teaching and learning resources by Adult Literacy Connect with support from the Reading Writing Hotline and State Library of Victoria.

### Personal highlights

Two things that fascinated me at the ACAL Conference were:

- VALBEC's 40<sup>th</sup> birthday card—what an achievement!
- The Conference App—very engaging and easy to navigate.

All the keynote speakers were very inspiring. Attending the first keynote address by Tim Rawlings, Head of Training Product Development, PwC Skills for Australia, helped me to understand better the role of PwC Skills for Australia (who are responsible for writing and monitoring the training packages); and made me aware of how I can contribute to their decision making processes as they will affect me and my learners.

The second keynote address was *Educating against storied assumptions: leveraging practice by changing mindset* by Dr Darlene Ciuffetelli Parker, Professor in the Faculty of



Education at Brock University, Canada. The focus of her talk was how schools are working collaboratively to change our assumptions about poverty as it can affect students' wellbeing and achievements.

*Bad, wrong, stupid, don't belong: shifting perspectives* by Dr Jenny Horsman, a community-based researcher and educator in Canada, was the most informative and thought-provoking keynote address for me. Jenny spoke about the impact of violence, trauma, and neglect on learning and that we need to address and acknowledge these impacts to support learning. We are all very resilient in the face of violent or negative experiences and we use various strategies to cope and continue and move on. However, these very strategies interfere when we want to learn (formally or informally)—and as Jenny said, 'they leave us feeling, bad, wrong, stupid, that we don't belong.' But if we value these strategies it opens up new possibilities.

Another interesting thing she said was that when problems become too large and we are overwhelmed, we don't have to resort to dramatic solutions—a lot of small things can help us to float to the surface. I loved the analogy Jenny used from the children's picture book, *Alexander's outing*:

...a young duck falls into a hole. Many people try to find the solution they are sure will save him. Everything fails, until a child thinks about floating the duckling to the top of the hole. When everyone joins in bringing tiny cup or beak-fuls of water, eventually the duck floats up on his own. (Horsman, 2018a).

The story is a beautiful metaphor: working together and making several tiny efforts (as educators and learners) can make a difference to learning. Rich



relationships, faith and constant encouragement are very important.

So joyful learning in my class is possible when I make those tiny efforts. Some examples given by Jenny were: welcome my students with a smile when they enter my class (Perhaps, I might even have some soft instrumental music on); encourage them and support them constantly; be positive and help them to be present in class fully, in mind and body; use different materials (clay, different colours of chenille wire stems, puzzle pieces, scarves, stones, etc.) for people to fiddle with. These materials help the students to be calm and stay present to learn. As did we as participants when we fiddled with the different materials Jenny invited us to use at the start of her talk. My busy mind was at ease and I enjoyed listening to her! I was fully present, aware of where I was and what I was doing—I was ‘mindful and not mind full’ (Horsman, 2018b).

## Presentations I attended

*Between the lines - seeing invisible trauma: teaching and learning* seemed like an extension of Jenny’s session when Linno Rhodes from Olympic Adult Education spoke of how attachment theory and neuroscience can help adult literacy teachers and learners. Linno received the 2017 International Specialised Skills Foundation Fellowship and she travelled to America, Canada and England and worked with the experts in the field of trauma, violence and adult learning. She is of the belief that adult literacy learners who have survived trauma go through the same ordeal when they are in the classroom. We as educators have to provide them with a safe environment so they can feel supported and can achieve success in the classroom. The most important thing she said for me was that as a teacher I have to bring my best self to each lesson and that I must focus on the process of learning and not the ‘achieved / not yet achieved!’

*Teaching to speak—classroom action research in pronunciation teaching* by Laura Chapman, Carringbush Adult Education was thought-provoking. Laura gave the findings of an 18-month project funded by ACFE CAIF (Adult Community and Further Education Capacity and Innovation Fund) Round 8. The presentation focused on the implementation of the project which included various professional development opportunities for teachers on pronunciation so they could help their learners, a centre-wide approach to pronunciation teaching and the development of a bank of resources.

This session made me realise that I have always lacked the confidence and the skills in teaching pronunciation in a systematic, planned way. Developing a centre-wide approach to pronunciation teaching may be daunting and time consuming, however, at our Centre we can try to attend more workshops on teaching pronunciation and try to develop a bank of resources for use. Integrating both planned and incidental pronunciation teaching into every lesson could be my next challenge?

Carringbush Adult Education presented another interesting and practical session—*A new resource for EAL teachers of beginner level adults* presented by Margaret Corrigan and Elizabeth Keenan. They presented a series of teacher training videos which they have created to enhance the knowledge, skills and confidence in teaching beginner level adults. The six- to eight-minute videos are designed for use as a teacher training resource and can be used by individual teachers, as well as for professional development at an organisation level. And they are free! You can have a look here: <https://www.carringbush.org.au/resources/>

*From heutagogy to meigmagogy* by Leigh Dwyer, Melbourne Polytechnic was creative. He explained that pedagogy is a method and practice of teaching; andragogy is the method and practice of teaching adult learners; heutagogy is the study of self-determined learning. So he came up with ‘Meigmagogy’: *meigma* (‘mix’ in Greek) + *gogy* = the method and practice of teaching mixed ability classes. He spoke of how all classes are mixed level classes and that students learn better when they realise the way they are being taught. The teacher of a mixed level class has to either change the input for some students or change the expectation regarding the output for some students (based on Stephen Krashen’s theory of second language acquisition). He then showed us a range of examples of how to manage the mixed level class through fitness analogies. For example, push-ups can be graded in difficulty through repetition and yoga can be graded to different levels of difficulty through extension. I found these analogies very easy to understand and hopefully implement: teach the same yoga asana / push-ups to all the students but they can perform at the level their body tells them to!

The last presentation of the conference was a fun and practical session—*The mega multi class* by Ruth Ryan and

Tanja Cuka from Chisholm Institute. Their focus was the use of technology and innovative teaching practices to engage their learners. I learned about Edpuzzle—teachers can use videos from the internet and can crop them, add audio notes or a quiz; Kahoot—a game-based learning platform (we also played and our team won); Seesaw—a digital portfolio; and Quizlet—uses games and flash cards for learning.

Many thank-yous to ACAL for granting me the scholarship to attend the conference. The scholarship was the result of a grant from a philanthropic trust, the Joe White Bequest. It was an inspirational and energising opportunity to listen to so many new ideas and establish collaborations. I enjoyed building the connections on a social and a professional level. Many congratulations to the organisers once again for such a fantastic effort and we look forward to the next ACAL conference in Sydney.

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# What's Out There

## From 'empowerment' to 'compliance': neoliberalism and adult literacy provision in Australia.

by Stephen Black

*Reviewed by Pauline O'Maley*

In *From 'empowerment' to 'compliance': neoliberalism and adult literacy provision in Australia* (2018) Stephen Black highlights the stark contrast between the optimism of the burgeoning adult literacy field of the 70s and 80s and the neoliberal era of deadening compliance that has overtaken it since the 1990s. His article is both thorough and timely. I found it a distressing but essential read, not because we are not aware of the change, but because living every day in the all-consuming, exhausting world of ever increasing compliance while trying to focus on the individual needs of real students in real classrooms it is difficult to find time to reflect on this seismic shift: the stark difference between these two discourses and the consequences for students and teachers of thirty years of relentless neoliberalism. Black suggests '[t]here are now few spaces for an empowering adult literacy education' (p.104) in this fundamental ideological shift from literacy being seen as a right to it being positioned as a resource (p.120). Indeed. And just as alarming, I think, there are few spaces to reflect on this situation and its consequences. With this paper he gives us such a space: I urge you to snatch the time to read it.

Black centres his concerns on literacy learners broadly and demonstrates the way in which the slippage from literacy into foundation skills, with its sole focus on jobs, has locked out many of the very students these adult literacy courses were initially conceived for. He traces the changes in nomenclature and the way in which this slippage into foundation skills not only devalues and dissipates the distinct field of adult literacy but also foregrounds 'employability skills' thus locking out students who are not focused on employment. Ironically this seeming broadening out to include employability skills has, he argues, narrowed the way in which literacy is conceptualised. 'The ACSF basically defines what literacy (and numeracy) means for teachers, because as we have seen, federal government funding is dependent on students' demonstrating competence across the ACSF levels' (p.125).

He highlights the demeaning impoverished discourse of foundation skills by outlining the course description of a TAFE NSW unit (Plan to improve personal effectiveness) in Certificate 1 in Preparation for Work. He reproduces the performance criteria for the unit, one of which is '[i]dentify acceptable basic hygiene practices for a limited range of contexts' (p.131), suggesting '[w]hile this unit is just one of many in the course ... it does nevertheless illustrate just how far adult literacy (foundation skills) curriculum has shifted towards a centralised industry and employability agenda' (p.132). It is also, as he effectively highlights, a deficit discourse, which he argues, 'would seem to imply that students who are lacking in basic literacy abilities are also deficient in dress and hygiene practices' (p.132).

As Black details, there have been important accounts of this discursive shift in adult literacy, but not for some time. Black builds on this earlier work, and adds to it. He presents a comprehensive account of what he calls the social democratic era, the 1970s and 80s, with its focus on social justice, influenced by the work of Paulo Freire. He acknowledges the era was not without tensions but argues it was an era of optimism that focused on the students' right to adult literacy as a means of transforming their lives.

In giving his account of the discursive shift that has occurred, Black demonstrates a turning away from a focus on the needs of individuals to a focus on the needs of business and the economy. While adult literacy provision burgeoned in the 80s and 90s it was within a specific agenda of literacy as human capital. He traces the increasing influence on adult literacy policy, pedagogy and curriculum of the OECD which 'strongly promotes the concept of literacy as human capital' (p.126) and the way in which this powerful organisation's 'ideas and policies on education have become the taken-for-granted "common sense"' (p.126). He also critiques the impact on provision of what he calls 'policy entrepreneurs' and the way in which their voices have silenced the voices of practitioners. He traces the way

in which, in keeping with neoliberal principles, private consultants and industry groups have come to play a leading role in cementing a narrow discourse of literacy as human capital and influencing both policy and curriculum. He suggests these policy entrepreneurs, working ‘predominately within a “crisis” discourse’ (p.129), provide research *for* policy rather than a more critical research *of* policy.

For the Victorian reader, Black’s focus on New South Wales, and in particular TAFE NSW, could be seen as a drawback. But while he uses TAFE NSW to illustrate his critique, it is the broader narrative that is so important and, I argue, useful to Victorian readers. It allows us to apply the same critique to provision in Victoria that Black applies in NSW, and of course we find the environment is not so different anyway.

Reading Black reinforces the huge distance we have travelled from adult literacy with a human individual face; much has been lost, and it is hard to see the gains. A few years ago at a VALBEC conference a policy entrepreneur told me that I (and others) had a pessimistic view of the current adult literacy landscape. This person I am sure would say the same about Stephen Black after reading this article. I beg to differ: no, not pessimistic, realistic. Black’s article’s use, I believe, is not to confirm these losses, although it does that clearly, but to present a realistic picture of the current situation. He does not offer us any easy fixes; there are none. He does, however, I believe, bring our focus to the important work he and others have been doing with their research *of* policy, which he says is ‘often critical, qualitative, seeks new knowledge and may challenge the status quo’ (p.129).

While Black promotes research as a way forward in finding a space for empowering counter discourses, in the last edition

of *Fine Print* Karen Charman, with her article on the work of the Public Pedagogies Institute, beautifully models another way of speaking back to the pervasive, corrosive economic model of education. She suggests, ‘I believe one of our most significant contributions to shifting the fixation with compliance and measurable skills and knowledge has been to refrain from directly arguing against these terms. In order to move to a more productive space we must shift focus to where knowledge in all its manifestations is recognised’ (2018, p.5).

It is easy, I would suggest, to have our energy sapped by the regime of compliance, which Black suggests diminishes ‘professional judgement and autonomy’ (p.134). I think he, with this article, offers us a chance to pause, refocus and reclaim some of our energy. We can use this to refocus our discussions about students and their needs and capacity, as Black himself has done consistently throughout his career, in order to challenge the dominant discourse of compliance and seek new knowledge and ways of being.

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## Best practice guides: pre-accredited language and literacy programs

Online resources published by Keysborough Learning Centre

*reviewed by Margaret Corrigan and Cathy Gill*

These best practice guides and supporting resources are the outcomes of the Word for Word research project into the quality of pre-accredited language and literacy programs in the Southern Metropolitan Region. The project was funded by ACFE and conducted by Keysborough Learning Centre.

The best practice guides and accompanying resources are aimed at Learn Local organisations. They are useful for both management and teachers of pre-accredited language and literacy programs. They make reference to recent literature on quality language and literacy provision for adults.

The guide is divided into three parts: organisational best practice; best practice in the classroom and; resources to support best practice.

### **Organisational best practice**

The guide outlines the characteristics of social capital, such as confidence, community connections, trust levels and the ability to engage. The building of social capital takes a whole of organisation approach, which assists learners to build their own social capital so they can move along their education and employment pathway. To achieve this, the guide suggests that organisations adopt practices such as providing a welcoming environment; evaluating organisation practices, such as enrolment procedures to ensure they are non-discriminatory and non-confrontational; ensuring all staff involved in the organisation have an understanding of working with people from different cultural backgrounds and who may have experienced barriers to education in the past.

In order for the sector to raise its profile and attract more funding, we need to promote what we know are quality pre-accredited language and literacy programs, which excel in building the social capital of learners.

It is argued that a well-designed initial assessment is a critical part of the enrolment process, so that individual learning needs are well-understood. The results of the initial assessment provide important information for teachers to assist them with their planning. Learners with similar needs can then be grouped together.

The guide discusses the importance of frequency and scheduling of classes. Word for Word research suggests that two to three days per week for three hours a day is considered optimal as it gives learners adequate time to balance formal learning with other aspects of their lives. For optimal learning, small class sizes (ten learners or less) enhance the teacher's ability to effectively cater for high needs learners. At times pre level one learners may benefit from a one-to-one learning situation.

Organisations are encouraged to think creatively in order to assist learners to improve their pathway outcomes. Through internal networks of Learn Local organisations sharing ideas, resources and workloads, pathways can be developed. Engagement with external networks, including libraries, health and employment groups, helps to raise the profile of the Learn Local organisation and establish pathways for learners.

### **Best practice in the classroom**

Developing confidence and connections is the key to successful learning and is what skilled teachers of pre-accredited language and literacy programs excel at. Relationships between the teacher and the learner and among learners are crucial to success. Teachers can foster these relationships through creating a warm and friendly environment.

Activities need to be relevant and meet the real-life needs of learners. Teacher planning should be based on assisting learners to achieve their goals. It should be responsive, systematic and purposeful.

Digital literacy skills should be developed as an integral part of language and literacy learning. ICT needs to be normalised and not segregated into its own computer skills class. Learners have important everyday demands which need to be met by the use of digital literacy skills. Teachers can build learners' capacity to manage their obligations through the use of myGov and Centrelink apps.

Teachers need to build learners' intercultural competence, by creating and nurturing a non-discriminatory and respectful classroom environment. They can support the development of employability skills through teaching of the cultural expectations related to punctuality and the asking of clarifying questions.

The reality for many classes is that they have mixed-ability learners. A structured initial assessment allows teachers to understand the individual learners' needs and plan lessons to cater for all learners in the class.

### **Resources to support best practice**

The guide provides many useful activities for teachers' immediate use. This section is divided into warmers, group activities, reading and writing activities, and spelling activities. It includes a very useful list of websites and apps, accompanied by a helpful description. There is also a comprehensive list of publications which may be of interest to teachers.

<https://www.klckeys.com.au/teaching-and-learner-resources>

**This review was written by Carringbush Adult Education CEO Margaret Corrigan and Education Manager Cathy Gill, who between them have fifty years' teaching experience.**



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