

this issue:

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Teacher empowerment through action research

By David Nunan, Hayley Black and Julie Choi

Remembering Maggie Power

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Adult Education in
the Community

Editorial

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the Reading Writing Hotline, a Commonwealth funded national referral and information service for adults wishing to improve their literacy and numeracy skills. To mark this milestone, Vanessa Iles and Pamela Osmond, both members of the current Hotline team, share with us the analysis of caller data undertaken to find out who is using the service. Their analysis raises important questions about the availability of literacy and numeracy programs for people who aren't just looking to improve their employability.

The term 'action research' has been around for a bit longer than 25 years and has become so ubiquitous in education that it is easy to forget what it actually means. Fortunately for us, David Nunan, Hayley Black and Julie Choi offer a succinct and practically focused explanation of action research. As they note, what distinguishes action research from reflective teaching is sharing your experiences with others: 'Publishing, i.e., "going public", opens up your research to scrutiny and comment by others, and fulfils one of the defining criteria for research.' We look forward to you all getting inspired by this article and flooding the *Fine Print* inbox with your research stories.

Many of you will have known Maggie Power, if not personally, then through the many resources that she created and shared with adult literacy educators. Maggie passed away in June this year and we are very grateful to Lindee Conway for collecting memories of Maggie from friends and colleagues to share with the wider adult education community in the pages of this issue.

If you were unable to attend the VALBEC conference in May, you'll be pleased to see that presenters from three

of the sessions have written for this issue of *Fine Print*: Christine Tully (as presenter) and Elizabeth Gunn (as participant) talk about getting beyond the anxiety that teaching numeracy can instil in 'literacy people'; Jennifer Coutts and Kerryn Durden reflect on their introduction of student-led learning circles (also a great example of action research); and Marie McLeod offers advice on how adult educators might help students to identify and cultivate their strengths by applying the principles of positive psychology.

In 'I Always Have a Plan B', an account of being a literacy educator in the prison system, Catherine Clancy embodies the 2019 VALBEC conference theme, 'Resilience: connect, educate, empower.' These ideas are also plain to see in our interview with Robyn Spandonide, on teaching refugees in regional Victoria; and with Mohammed Ahmad and Winnie Dunn, on how the Sweatshop literacy movement in Western Sydney ensures marginalised voices are heard and listened to.

And last, but by no means least, in *What's Out There*, Sarah Deasey discovers some of those marginalised voices in *Sweatshop Women: Volume One* edited by Winnie Dunn, and Andrew Kelly finds inspiration and practical examples for VET and VCAL teachers in *Numeracy: Teaching maths in context* by Dave Tout.

As always, please contact me if you have a comment about this issue of *Fine Print* or would like to propose a future article. Please note that *Fine Print* has a new email address: fineprintvalbec@gmail.com

Deryn Mansell

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.

Ring, ring. Who's still there? An analysis of callers to the Reading Writing Hotline.

By *Vanessa Iles and Pamela Osmond*

The first report of the Reading Writing Hotline (Riordan, 1994) was titled 'Ring, Ring - Who's There?'. In this 25th anniversary year for the Hotline it is timely to ask, 'Who's still there?' and 'Who has been there for the past 25 years?' In addressing these questions, this paper draws on information from a recent research project undertaken by the Reading Writing Hotline on behalf of the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training.

Since the late 1970s, many thousands of Australian adults have enrolled in Adult Foundation Skills courses every year (or adult basic education, or adult literacy courses as they were originally termed), and many millions of dollars in public funding has been allocated to programs to assist these adults. However, little is known about who these people are. What motivates them to improve their skills and what do we know of the backgrounds of their lives? Historically, very little information has been collated concerning the clients (and potential clients) of language, literacy and numeracy provision in Australia. There is little data, for example on where they live, the predominant age group, their employment status, their language background or what their learning needs are: information that is potentially very useful in the policy arena. This gap in available data was highlighted in a report compiled by the Australian Council for Adult Literacy (ACAL) following a research forum in Darwin in 2017, which lamented the dearth of data available to 'strengthen the evidence base' in order to inform policy discussions and more carefully target policy directions and provision in the future, in particular policies concerning funding of provision (ACAL, 2017).

One source of such information is the data collected by the Reading Writing Hotline (hereafter referred to as the Hotline), the Commonwealth funded national referral and information service for adults wishing to improve their literacy and numeracy skills. The Hotline is staffed by experienced specialist literacy and numeracy teachers who counsel callers and, where possible, refer them to an appropriate course in their area. In the process, demographic information is recorded on each caller. The Hotline celebrates its 25th anniversary in 2019 and has collected demographic information on its callers since its inception. It is therefore in an excellent position to 'strengthen the evidence base', since callers to the

Hotline provide a national snapshot of people with an expressed need to improve their literacy and numeracy skills. It provides a national sample of adults who feel that their literacy and numeracy skills are not adequate for functioning in their personal, social and/or work domains and who are therefore seeking appropriate literacy and numeracy services.

This data differs from that of the frequently quoted OECD sponsored Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) and its earlier iterations. These large-scale international studies sample and survey entire populations, producing statements such as 'one in five Australians – around three million adults – have low literacy and/or numeracy skills' (OECD, 2017, p.9). It has been argued, however (for example, Black & Yasukawa, 2011, Hamilton, 2012), that amongst these three million adults are very many who would not describe themselves as having low literacy or numeracy skills, and who perform perfectly adequately in their everyday and work lives. They do not define themselves as part of that sector of the population and need to be 'persuaded of the role the government has imagined for them' (Hamilton, 2012, p.87). The data from the Hotline, however, represents adults with an expressed need to improve their skills: adults who do identify with the segment of the population that struggles with literacy or numeracy skills: albeit a very small sub-section of these adults.

The study

Data on a range of demographic fields recorded from Hotline callers was graphed in order to highlight the trends. A search was made of the literature relative to the field in Australia for the past thirty years, and of the Hotline's archival material, in order to identify significant policy changes or other disrupters that would explain any unexpected shifts identified in the data.



The current Hotline team celebrating 25 years of the service earlier this year.

While comparison of data across the period was difficult in some areas due to changes in management, personnel, IT and recording systems, it was nevertheless considered that the records contained sufficient reliable data to reveal trends in the demographic profile of callers. In addition, a consideration of annual fluctuations in total number of callers to the Hotline provides a window to the socio-political background of the field, as it is reflected in these fluctuations.

Results

In general, the data shows that there has been remarkably little variation in the demographic patterns of callers over the past 25 years. For the purpose of this paper, in addition to total caller numbers, only the categories of gender, age, level of formal schooling, language background and employment status are discussed since this is the data that is most reliable and most useful in helping to develop a profile of the average caller to the Hotline. This data has suggested that the average caller to the Hotline has consistently been male, aged between 25 and 44, left school in Years 7 to 9, is employed or not looking for work and is from an English-speaking background.

Fluctuation in call numbers

Over the 25-year period, the Hotline has received in excess of 160,000 calls, with a spike in the first three years of an average of 14,600 for each of those years. After those initial years, the call volume dropped off sharply. Subsequent years have fluctuated, with the average for the past four years being in the region of 4000 calls. At first glance, the fluctuation in total calls after the high of the first three years, would seem to suggest that the 'literacy

problem' has been progressively addressed by the provision made available. However, a closer consideration of the development of the field of adult literacy in those years provides another, more nuanced interpretation.

The reason for the high level of calls can be explained by the profile that the issue of adult literacy and the Hotline had in its early years of operation. It had its beginning at a time of heightened public profile for the issues surrounding adult literacy, a public profile that present practitioners could only dream about. The United Nations had declared 1990 as International Literacy Year, bringing the field into the public consciousness in Australia, perhaps for the first time. It also heralded an increase in funding for course provision, research, professional development and resource development, including the TV series, *The Reading Writing Roadshow* and its associated workbook, both companion products to the Hotline. The 1991 *Australian Language and Literacy Policy*, which committed substantial funds to the teaching of adult literacy, as well as to a comprehensive research and development program, further heightened the profile. During this time, stories of adults with literacy issues were a novelty in the public arena and featured in a number of high-profile TV programs such as Channel 9's *A Current Affair*, for example, so that the issue was consistently aired in the mainstream media.

The Hotline was set up in 1994 to provide 'literacy tuition, information and referral to people who watched the ABC's *Reading Writing Roadshow* and/or used the associated Workbook' (Morgan Hunter Consulting, 1997, p.i). Its objectives were later revised to recognise that the service

had become primarily a professional information, advisory and referral service rather than primarily providing support to the *Reading Writing Roadshow*. However, during the Hotline's first three years, the *Reading Writing Roadshow* was being screened on ABC TV. At the end of each episode, the Hotline number was displayed on the screen and viewers were invited to call the Hotline if they needed help with the workbook, or if they had other literacy related questions. Many of the calls during these years were therefore from people wanting help with the *Roadshow* workbook.

Extensive promotion accompanied the screening of the *Roadshow* and release of the workbook, including whole page spreads in metropolitan daily newspapers. As an indication of the reach of the program, in excess of 20,000 copies of the workbook were sold, including through the retailer Kmart, which displayed them at the checkout in every store. As a result, the profile of the Hotline benefited enormously from this level of exposure.

The fluctuations of successive years reflect a range of influences such as operational changes at the Hotline (even changes in the wording of the TV advertisement) and changes in levels of literacy provision over this period. For example, there is a peak in calls in 1996, paradoxically attributed to the substantial *decrease* in funding for programs, including the employment related Special Intervention Program from the middle of that year. Despite awareness of the issue still being highlighted through the *Reading Writing Roadshow*, the sites of

provision that had been promoted in the past had had their funding and capacity greatly reduced with many no longer accepting enrolments. The field had acquired a public profile, but there were now fewer programs or sites of provision (Morgan Hunter Consulting, 1997, p.5) prompting many to call the Hotline to enquire about alternative provision.

A consistent student profile

Gender ratio

The data over the period has shown that the proportion of male to female callers has remained constant, at an average of 60% males to 40% females (figure 1).

Age and level of education

The largest age category has consistently been the 25 to 44 age group, followed by the 45 to 64 age group.

For most of the years reported, the highest level of formal education reached was from Year 7 to Year 9. However, this changed briefly in 2010 when the minimum age for leaving school was increased to 17 (figure 2).

Language background

Contrary to the popular belief that literacy issues in a country like Australia must be related to language background, only an average of 13% of the callers since 2005 have been from an English as an Additional Language/Dialect background (figure 3). The variation in 2010 can be explained by the unreliability of the ways in which the data was collected in that year.

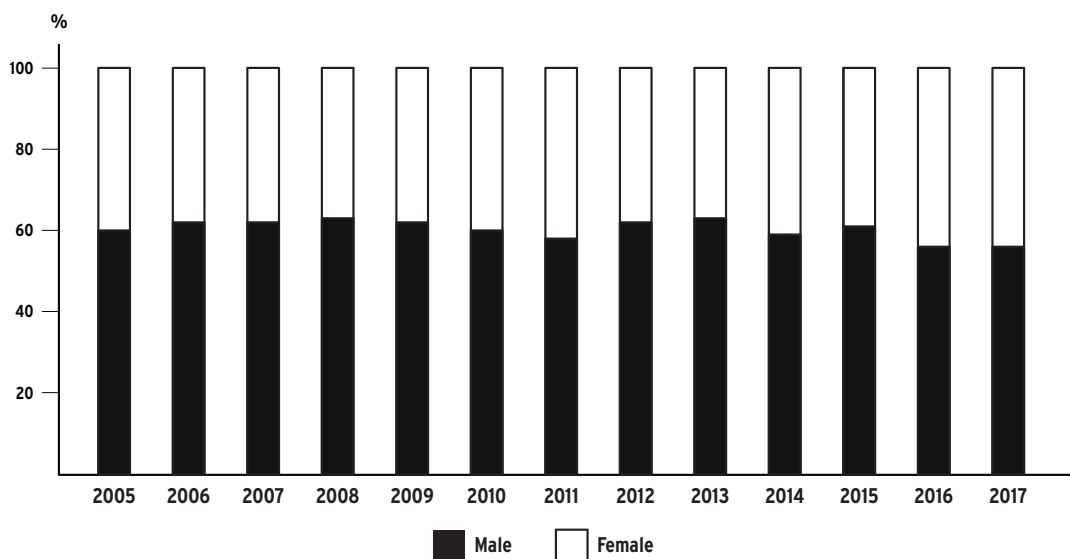


Figure 1: Gender ratio of callers to the Hotline, 2005-2017

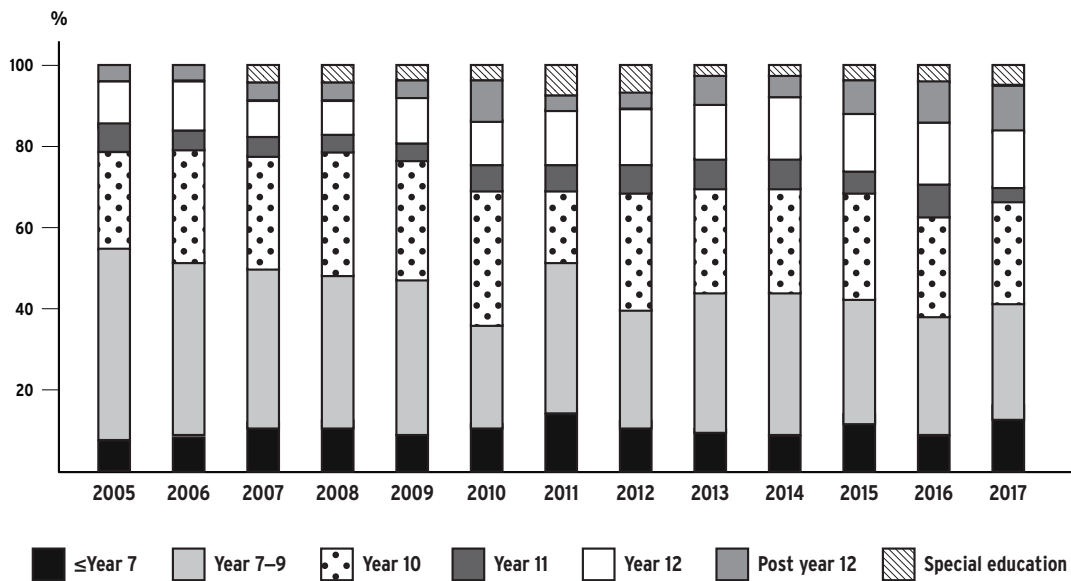


Figure 2: Previous education levels of callers to the Hotline 2005-2017

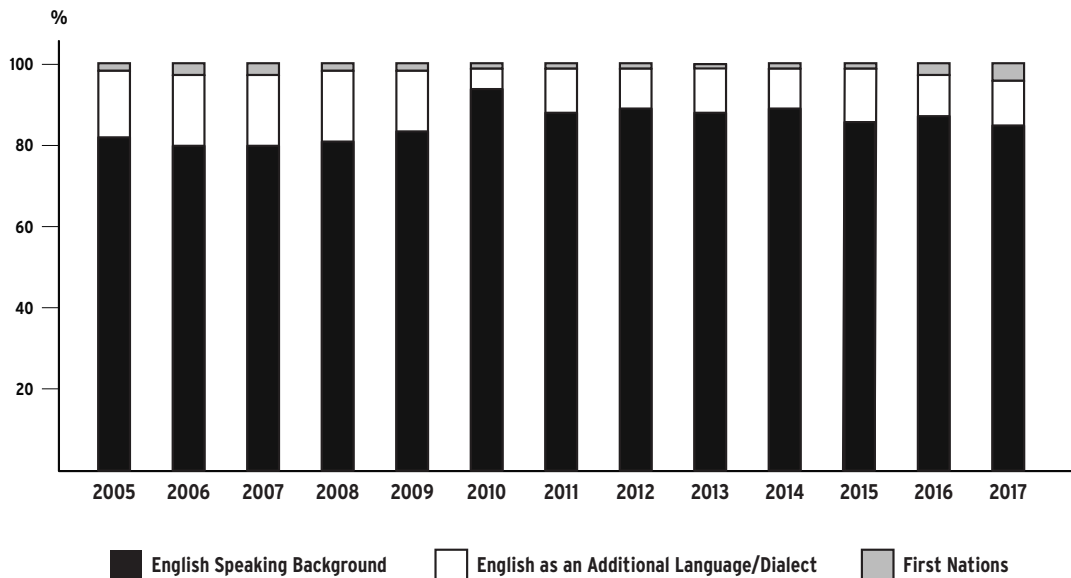


Figure 3: Language background of callers to the Hotline, 2005-2017

Employment status

Statistics for the whole period show that an average of 17% of callers were unemployed and an average of 69% were not jobseekers. That is, they were either employed, self-employed or not looking for work.

The low proportion of unemployed callers possibly reflects the fact that the Commonwealth programs for jobseekers deemed in need of literacy or numeracy tuition (e.g. the current Skills for Education and Employment program) have been in existence during this time, with most

prospective students referred to the program directly from their job referral network. Nevertheless, the consistently high proportion of callers who are not jobseekers has posed a problem for the Hotline, since the number of available non-employment related programs has continued to decrease.

Concluding remarks

It is interesting to note that little has changed since the inception of the Hotline. The following was noted as an important implication of the first statistical report in 1994:

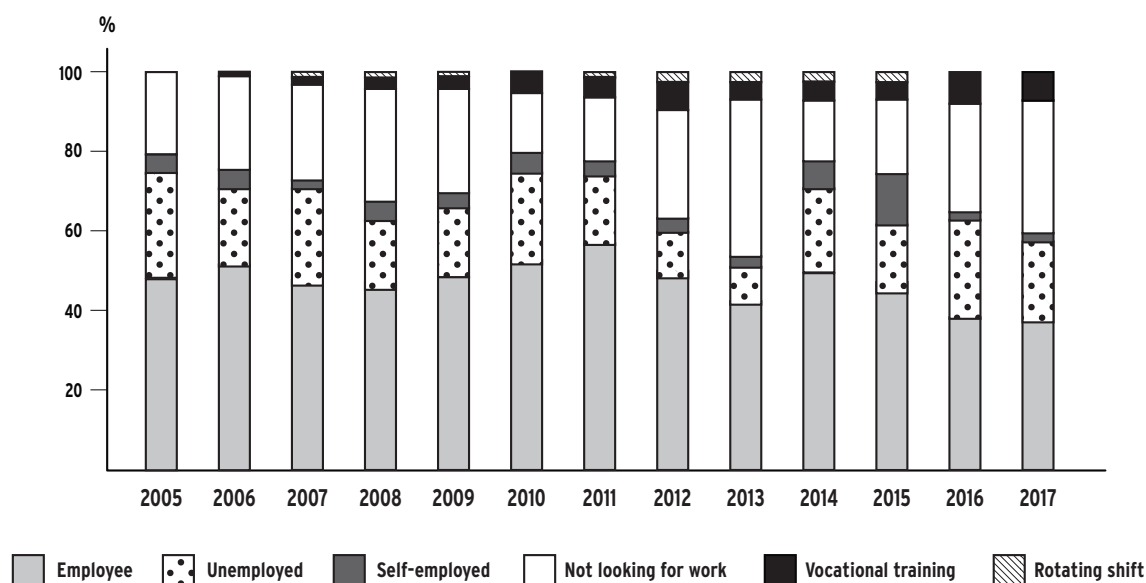


Figure 4: Employment status of callers to the Hotline, 2005-2017

The employment picture, particularly with regards to gender breakdown highlights the fact that more employed men than unemployed are calling. These early results also indicate that 28% of female callers are not looking for work (with a further 27% employed). This large group will gain no access to DEET funded programs, thus being totally reliant on ‘community’ provision. Therefore providers nationally can expect a growth in demand for programs for non-jobseekers. (Riordan, 1994, p.37)

Unfortunately, although the demand from non-jobseekers has remained high, there has been proportionately little non-employment related provision that the staff of the Hotline can refer callers to and even this has decreased in recent years. This has been, and remains, a consistent challenge for the Hotline and for advocates for funding of appropriate, flexible provision.

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Pamela Osmond has worked in the field of adult basic education in Australia since the 1970s in a number of roles and is the author of a wide range of teaching and learning resources. She has recently researched a history of the adult basic education field in NSW and is at present a project officer with the Reading Writing Hotline.

Vanessa Iles is the manager of the Reading Writing Hotline. She draws on 20 years of experience teaching English language, literacy and numeracy both in the classroom and in the workplace. Vanessa is committed to optimising opportunities for adult learners by improving connections between learners, training providers and employers.

Teacher empowerment through action research

By David Nunan, Hayley Black and Julie Choi

Since graduating with a Master of Teaching degree two years ago, Shannon has been teaching immigrants in an adult language centre. Although she has grown in confidence and competence, there are aspects of her teaching that concern her. She is particularly concerned with the amount of talking that she does, as well as with the quality of the language produced by her students.

Shannon consults the director of studies, who suggests that she record her lessons over several days, to check the amount of talking she does, as well as to evaluate the type of language produced by the students. When Shannon does this, she is disturbed to find that on average 70% of the class time is taken up with teacher talk. Much of this talk was made up of lengthy monologues devoted to managing and directing the learning process. She also finds that student talk is directed by her. She asks a question, a student responds, and she evaluates their response.

Shannon: So, OK, let's talk about what you did on the weekend? Shaheen?

Student: I ... er ... I go market.

Shannon: Go?

Student: Er ... went ... went market.

Shannon: Good. I went to the market. Can you say that?

Student: I went market.

Shannon: *To* the market. I went *to* the market.

Student: I went *to* the market.

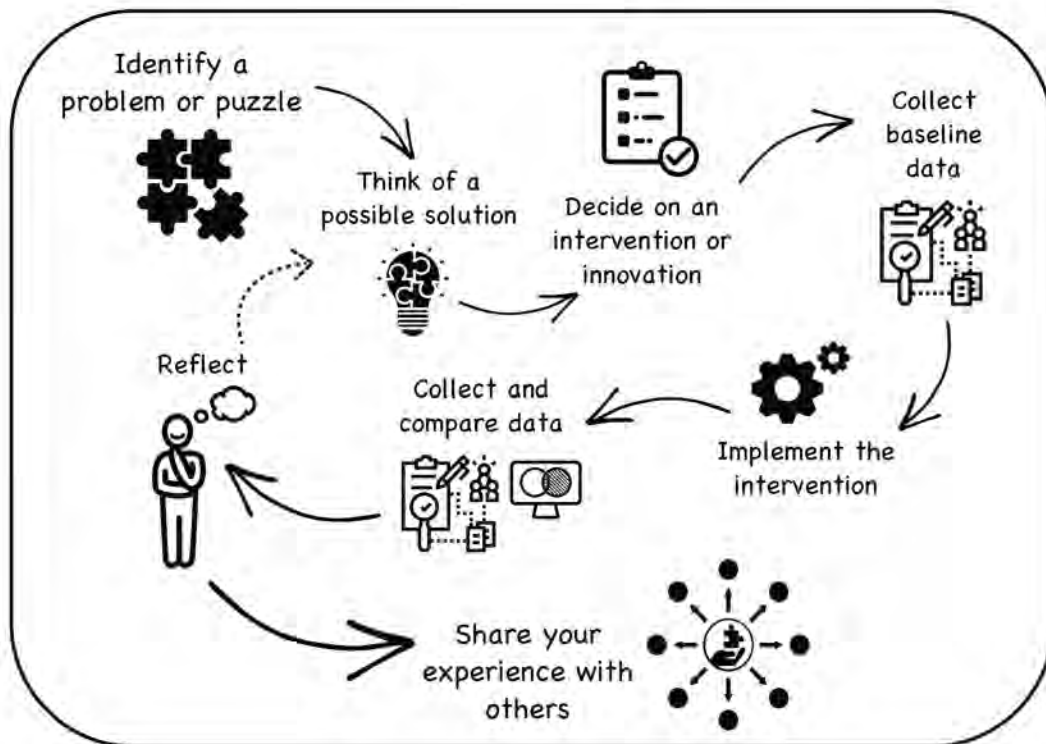
Shannon shares what she has learned with her director of studies and decides to incorporate teaching activities in which students have more active roles in contributing content to the lessons and have greater responsibility for managing their own learning. She creates small group tasks such as jigsaw listening and reading, in which she takes a 'back seat', monitoring and guiding students rather than directing the learning. Four weeks after changing the dynamics of her classroom and encouraging learners to take on active roles, she again records her lessons, and is gratified to find that the amount of teacher talk has more than halved and that the language her students produce is more like 'real world' discourse: they actively engage with each other, seek clarification, negotiate for a turn, agree and disagree and so on. At an in-service day at the end of semester, she gives a poster presentation based on what she learned.

What is action research?

Without being aware of it at the time, Shannon has carried out a piece of action research (AR). She has identified a problem in her classroom, collected some initial data to verify the nature of the problem, planned and carried out an intervention, evaluated the effect of the intervention, and reported the study to interested colleagues. The vignette illustrates the fact that through AR, teachers can investigate a problem or puzzle that has arisen in their teaching and experiment with ways of improving their practice. Teachers are sometimes put off by the term 'research', conjuring up images of academics carrying out complicated experiments in order to collect sets of data that are analysed using incomprehensible statistical formulas. This is one way of looking at research, but there are other ways, as the vignette shows.

Basically, all research is a process of asking a question or questions, collecting data that can potentially answer the question(s), analysing and interpreting (i.e. making sense of) the data, and telling others what they have found. In keeping with other types of research, these steps are fundamental to AR. A key defining distinction of AR is that it is under the control of the teacher. It is the teacher, not an external researcher, who decides what it is they want to investigate, how to go about investigating the issue, what changes they might or might not want to make to their practice, and how to report what they have found to other teachers who might be interested. The term 'action' highlights the fact that we don't collect and analyse data for its own sake, but to solve a problem, and improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning in our classrooms.

In short, despite differences of orientation and approach, AR has three essential characteristics. In the first place, it is carried out and controlled by teachers rather than external researchers. Secondly, it is aimed at improving



The steps in an AR study

teaching and learning in a local context. Thirdly, it involves the collaboration of teachers and learners. In the vignette above, we see all three characteristics. It is Shannon, not an external researcher who decides on the issue of interest. Her aim is to improve the quality of teaching and learning in her classroom. She also explained to her students why she was making changes to her classroom practice, and why she was giving them greater responsibility for their own learning.

Stephen Kemmis and Robin McTaggart, two key figures in AR, argue that it can be a powerful tool for teacher and learner empowerment. They summarise the method in the following way:

The linking of the terms ‘action’ and ‘research’ highlights the essential feature of the approach: trying out ideas in practice as a means of improvement and a means of increasing knowledge about the curriculum, teaching and learning. The result is improvement in what happens in the classroom and school, and better articulation and justification of the educational rationale for what goes on. Action research provides a way of working which links theory and practice into the one whole: ideas-in-action. (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988, p.6)

A comprehensive AR study will consist of the following steps:

1. Identify a problem or puzzle.
2. Think of a possible solution.
3. Decide on an intervention / innovation.
4. Collect data so you have a baseline for comparison. (This step is optional for exploratory AR.)
5. Implement the intervention.
6. Collect post-intervention data and compare it with the baseline data.
7. Reflect on the process and decide on whether to implement a second round of research.
8. Share your experience with others. Publishing, i.e., ‘going public’, opens up your research to scrutiny and comment by others, and fulfils one of the defining criteria for research. It is this final step that differentiates AR from reflective teaching.

In the next section, we present an AR study, in which a university teacher introduces an innovative approach to one of her courses in order to address a problem she perceived in that course.

Case study

Teaching English Internationally (TEI) was a one-semester course that ran in early 2018 as part of a Master

of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) in an Australian university. Sixty student teachers were enrolled in the class from local and international backgrounds. The course covered issues relating to the cultural politics of teaching English in an era of globalisation. The course required student to contest challenging concepts such as translanguaging, linguistic rights and globalisation against their own experiences of language and learning. To realise fully the goals of the course, collaboration and sharing between peers from disparate cultural and linguistic backgrounds was essential. In previous iterations of the course, the lecturer (Julie) noted that cross-cultural collaboration was minimal, at best.

Julie decided that an intervention was needed. She organised students into culturally and linguistically heterogeneous groups. Each group was required to draw on input from lectures and take part in jigsaw literature circles. For jigsaw literature circles, each group member had a different reading on the topic for the week. Students shared insights from their reading with their group and drew on these insights to create a multimodal project to present to the class at the end of the semester. This project was the basis for each student's final assessment. Each student had to be committed to and contribute to the work of the group because it was the group rather than the individual student who received a grade. The assessment was ever-changing and dynamic as students worked to structure their project under Julie's guidance and critical feedback. The technical term for this procedure is Group-Dynamic Assessment (G-DA) (see Poehner, 2009).

Time was allocated in each session for group members to meet and discuss their multimodal project. To encourage collaboration, students were given the freedom to use multiple modes (film, presentation slides, written texts, etc.) and engage in multiple perspectives to address the assessment topic: 'How should languages be taught in a new era of migration and mobility?'. The group multimodal assessment provided a meaningful reason for international and local students to collaborate and begin to see diversity as a resource for creating their assessment project.

Towards the end of the weekly lessons, Julie summarised the literature and addressed students' questions. Each session could conclude with a planning session for the multimodal group assessment where student teachers

would discuss their ideas with their group members. Due to limited class time, these discussions would frequently continue outside class in face-to-face meetings or on a digital platform. The small group multimodal presentations formed the finale to the course and were an opportunity for student teachers to contribute their group's perspectives and personal experiences.

In order to evaluate the impact of the innovation, a research assistant (Hayley), who had been a student teacher on the course the previous year, conducted interviews with student teachers who were eager to share their experiences of the group activities that they participated in. The interviews were framed by one question: 'How did your group collaborate and complete the group tasks together?', which aimed to elicit student teachers' perspectives and reflections on group work. The encouraging comments shared below allowed the teacher to see the importance of G-DA based group work for supporting student-student connections.

Student teachers believed the small group multimodal assessment increased student-student collaborations.

It set up a space for the students to really work together...like you need to sit together and make it together ... You need to involve different people's effort; this is very important. – *Cynthia*

This was a chance that everyone can bring all their thoughts together and create something fascinating. – *Karlee*

Each week the topics and group configurations changed which afforded student teachers an opportunity to communicate with all class members.

I think the reading jigsaw was an excellent way of structuring the seminars. I really like the readings she chose, and spreading that out amongst different people ... And the negotiation and the collaboration, the fact that you have to really listen to what people are saying, take it onboard, and voice your opinion back. It is about actual communication. – *Rachel*

Given the time and spatial constraints of the weekly sessions, student teachers were open to having extensive and less structured conversations on course topics beyond the classroom walls. What emerged were discussions that bridged differences. Student teachers commented

on expanding their awareness by learning about their group members' lives.

[one group member] has an office here in the city and we would meet and sit and talk and analyse each other. He was the 'native speaker' and we were all the 'others', but we tried to understand each other's perspectives. We spoke about our lives and we wanted to share. – *Sarah*

I feel like I enjoy working with different nationalities people. Sometimes we need more time to spend, to communicate. But we have some more ideas as well. For example, I know about Jenny's life in Australia. That's what makes me quite enjoy working on this. – *Cynthia*

The group tasks encouraged reflection on inclusive practices during group activities.

This helped me to think about when we do group work, how to engage with different people because sometimes we just want to get the things done and be very efficient and we didn't, like, think about how to include everybody. – *Cynthia*

While creating a multimodal piece of work, international student teachers realised their own communicative resources. For Cynthia, the group experience contributed to her language resources being drawn on and she felt she was able to improve her Mandarin.

So, because we have different nationalities, we need to use English. But sometimes I do talk to the other two students in Mandarin. Actually, Mandarin is not my first language as well. So English is easier for me to communicate, but ... every session I feel more comfortable. – *Cynthia*

For some students, this experience changed their perception of group work.

I am so grateful that the group experience was so positive. It sort of turned my head around. – *Jenny*

Oh, I really like group work now. And I am more motivated to do group work than a writing assignment, because, writing an assignment independently I feel very lonely, I don't have the motivation from others. – *Cynthia*

That is how the class has changed me. Now I am thinking as long as the assignments are designed in a very meaningful way, you can also discuss about it. It isn't supposed to be like 'ok I get a score, and this is all my thing', but actually learn from each other. It's really amazing. – *Karlee*

The innovation of the group tasks in the TEI course was designed to support ongoing discussions that involved choice, negotiation of meanings and the activation of learners' communicative repertoires. Listening to student teachers' comments shows us that there was a significant

Table 1: Steps in the action research process

| Steps | Case Study |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Problem Identification | In an era of globalisation, cross-cultural contact and collaboration are essential. This is not happening in a graduate TESOL teacher education course – a cultural divide exists between local and international students. |
| 2. Preliminary investigation | This is an optional step in the AR model we followed. |
| 3. Hypothesis formation | G-DA based collaborative group work will stimulate greater cross-cultural communication and enhance opportunities for self-directed learning. |
| 4. The innovation | The innovation, based on G-DA, involved lectures, jigsaw literature circles, and a small group multimodal assessment project. |
| 5. The data | Student interview responses. Students' final multimodal pieces of work. |
| 6. Outcomes | Significant increase in cross-cultural collaboration in and beyond the classroom. Greater sensitivity and appreciation for cross-cultural perspectives. Students' enhanced ability to take control of their own learning, and greater investment in assignment work. |

increase in peer–peer collaboration and discussion. Group tasks based on G-DA felt meaningful to the students and group diversity was an opportunity for mutual learning. There was a significant increase in cross-cultural collaboration in and beyond the classroom, student teachers exhibited greater sensitivity and appreciation for cross-cultural perspectives and demonstrated an enhanced ability to take control of their own learning and greater investment in assignment work. The steps in the AR project are summarised in Table 1.

Evaluating action research

In evaluating an AR network, Nunan (1993) interviewed and administered a questionnaire to a group of 120 teachers who had carried out an AR project. When asked how their teaching had changed as a result of doing AR, the teachers reported that they used a greater variety of teaching behaviours, praised students more, were more aware of students' feelings, made greater use of the target language in class for managing the learning process, were more conscious of students' non-verbal cues, incorporated students' ideas into their teaching, made greater use of group work, accepted divergent, open-ended student responses, and were more effective in getting students engaged in their own learning. In addition, they reported being less directive, criticising students less, and using less teacher talk.

The four most frequently mentioned advantages of engaging in AR were, first and foremost, empowerment and greater control over their own ongoing professional development; the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues; an enhanced sense of professionalism; and the development of practical and relevant activities for the classroom. Disadvantages included a lack of time for and expertise in doing research; in some cases, the hijacking of their AR by school administration; scepticism and a sense of threat by colleagues not involved in AR; and the fact that doing research sometimes got in the way of teaching.

When asked what advice they would give to teachers thinking of engaging in AR, most frequently mentioned were to start small, to collaborate and network with others, to have a knowledgeable and supportive ally inside your institution and to report your research as a narrative. In relation to the last point, Elbaz (1992) has this to say:

Initially, 'story' seems to be a personal matter: There is concern for the individual narrative of a teacher and

what the teacher herself, or a colleague or researcher, as privileged eavesdroppers, might learn from it. In the course of engaging with stories, however, we are beginning to discover that the process is a social one: The story may be told for personal reasons but it has an impact on its audience which reverberates out in many directions at once (p.423).

The following checklist is a useful tool for self-evaluating an AR proposal:

1. Is the project logical and coherent? If not, where are the gaps?
2. Is there harmony between your teaching and research? (Does the research flow out of and back into the teaching?)
3. Is the research question worth asking? Why do you think so?
4. Are there alternative ways of investigating the question? If so, what are they?
5. Can you predict a follow-up question or questions?
6. Are the learners participants in or objects of the research? If the latter, how could their role be enhanced?
7. Is the proposed data collection method consistent with the research question?
8. How will the data be analysed and interpreted?
9. Who will you collaborate with or consult in conducting the research?

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Remembering Maggie Power

By Lindee Conway

Lindee Conway was a friend and colleague of Maggie Power for more than twenty years. With permission from family and friends, Lindee shares some memories of a staunch, funny and smart woman.

Maggie Power died in mid-June of this year. She was sixty-four. In newspaper notices and on social media, Maggie was described as: funny, kind, sassy, smart, dedicated and a great teacher and writer. There can be no quibble about any of these terms; Maggie was a remarkable, and remarkably lovely, person.

Maggie lived most of her life in St Kilda, with a brief detour to live in the Dandenongs for a few years. She was a true urbanite; friends and family sighed with relief when she came back to the city's edge. She began working at Adult Migrant Education Services (AMES) in Victoria, by chance. Another teacher and good friend of Maggie tells this story:

Our then manager, Clinton, was knee-deep in time-tabling. He rushed into the staff room and said: 'Does anyone know who is available to teach next term?'. Knowing Maggie had just graduated as an adult student, and with a new TESOL degree, I said: 'Yes, actually I do know someone: Maggie Power'. God, what a good thing I did that! Look at the result: all that great teaching, connection with learners, and her books. – *Kerry O'Meara*.

Later, Kerry went to work in Vietnam for AMES. She needed Maggie's help while there:

Maggie faxed me many pages of her early ESL exercise books in answer to my desperate call for low-level resources. They were a life saver and loved by the students. In fact, they were spirited away by entrepreneurial students, copied, printed and bound into books for sale there.

I met Maggie when we worked together in St Albans in Melbourne's west. Her warmth and enthusiasm were evident from the first hello. The reputation of her books, including *Passages to English* and *Pictures to Words*, preceded her; everyone loved and used her work. Yet she was always humble about the materials she had produced. I used to cut up the beautifully drawn pictures



A young Maggie Power. Supplied by Maggie's family

from *Pictures* and hand them out separately – to try to get the class to speculate what would be in the next picture. I was slightly afraid she might think I'd got it wrong, but she was genuinely interested in my approach. I remember her telling me she had to be talked into her first curriculum and resource writing stint for AMES; her assumption was that everybody wrote these kinds of active, humourous worksheets, perfectly pitched for migrant and refugee learners.

Maggie was especially talented at long-term friendships. Sharon Duff remembers:

My friendship with Maggie started the day I commenced at Collingwood AMES in 1993. She was standing at her very busy desk of papers, smiling warmly and welcoming me as I walked in the door. Each day she would greet me with the same smile and offer to share her fabulous worksheets with her colleagues. I was always amazed how she could find a worksheet in the middle of one of the many neatly stacked, tall piles of paper sitting on her desk.

As I got to know Maggie, I realised how clever, well-read and funny she really was. She was a fabulous teacher and a very talented writer. She inspired and encouraged me on numerous occasions over the years. She was one of the most caring and inclusive people I've ever met. She had the ability to make people feel special by organising special cakes and cards for

everyone's birthday. Her generosity and concern for those less fortunate knew no bounds. She was also a strong woman of principle who worked tirelessly to improve all teachers' working conditions as a devoted AEU member.

She became a founding member of Urban Lyrebirds and published her last teaching resource *Passages to English 3*. We will miss her terribly, but her legacy will live on. I consider myself very fortunate to have been one of her friends.

Maggie was a great unionist, both for teachers and for the community. I recall arriving at the Melbourne Docks during the protracted Waterfront Dispute in 1998 and she immediately gave me her deckchair to sit in. She said she'd been sitting in it for hours; it was my turn. The Victorian Branch of the Australian Education Union recalled Maggie's unstinting energy:

I remember Maggie as a kind, thoughtful, considerate woman who managed all of these remarkable traits while also being strong, bold and brave. She represented her members with great passion and dedication, and she spoke about her students with love and warmth. – *Meaghan Flack, AEU*

In times when Australia's policy towards refugees was different, this country hosted Kosovar refugees in Bandiana as part of the Safe Haven Program. Maggie was an integral part of making an uncertain group of people feel welcomed and valued. She also worked on Nauru:

While working a short stint on Nauru where she assisted refugee families' transition to classes in local schools, she noticed the lack of opportunity being offered. She hated the oppressive heat, but she loved the friendships she made and that she continued to nurture with two refugee families now in Australia. Even when very sick, Maggie made a great effort to visit them and remind them they were not forgotten – *Jenny Leahy*

Maggie and I had a few things in common, apart from being teachers and liking language; the last text message I sent her was to say I'd read a book with three words in it I didn't know (*anfractuous, clerisy, lenitive*. I ask you!) – she was very supportive of me in my outrage and anguish. We both came from large families and often discussed how that shaped our lives. We both had slight



Maggie with Carmel Davies (left) and Sharon Duff (right) at the launch of *Passages to English 3* and *Sing with Me 3!* In 2016. Urban Lyrebirds



Maggie on the picket lines in 2015. She took a bag of apples and baked biscuits for the picketers. AEU

detours in life's steady path as young people and returned to study later. We both had daughters and talked about that, and later, about our fabulously amazing, talented and gorgeous grand-children. She was great fun to talk to – she loved trivia, quizzes, puzzles and language. When Maggie's illness was in remission, we went on a three-hour ramble through St Kilda and ended up at a café on the beach, talking and talking. This is indeed a memory to treasure.

Her work made a difference to people's lives and this final story links her brilliant thinking and its power to make a difference, improving the life of both teacher and learner:

I was working in a company teaching English and literacy to a mixed group of women – some production, some packing. 'Mary' had a great memory for the thirteen-digit product codes and some product names, but she couldn't write or read to save herself.

There wasn't much we could do in a one-hour class, once a week. So, we decided, Mary and I, that if she could get some sight words down and some of the alphabet, she'd go to a local neighbourhood house to do the beginners class.

I was using *Passages to English 2* with the group, so we used that. Simple sentences, word repetition, common life experiences, 'Seven Mistakes' (Mary's favourite) and peers to help her. She got the alphabet and some common sight words. She started doing the 'Find the words' in *Passages ...* She was stoked. She got the enrolment forms for the neighbourhood house. *Passages* is well crafted to support people who are starting out, fearful of failure and sure they won't

succeed. Scaffolding through the chapters ensures gradual confidence and independence. – *Rhonda Pelletier*

Maggie's language and literacy works include:

Oxford Pictures to Words (1996) Oxford University Press.

Written with Carmel Davies (ISBN 0195538358)

Passage to English (2008) Urban Lyrebirds (ISBN 9780980466409)

It's Your Right: Human Rights Kit (2009) for AMES and the Australian Human Rights Commission <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/education/publications/its-your-right-english-second-language-esl-resource-2009>

See also: <https://www.urbanlyrebirds.com/>

Practical Matters

Living in a material world: Beyond numeracy anxiety

By *Christine Tully and Elizabeth Gunn*

Liz

'I identify as a numeracy person' said Chris Tully at the beginning of her 2019 VALBEC workshop. Chris says she feels anxious about teaching literacy. I suspect she's saying that to make 'literacy people' like me feel better about our numeracy teaching anxiety, but she assures us that although her background enables her to live confidently in the world of numeracy teaching, she is less confident in the world of literacy teaching. It's like we come from two different tribes: the tribe of literacy teachers and the tribe of numeracy teachers. But numeracy is an essential life skill. Chris's 2019 VALBEC workshop opens literacy teachers' eyes to the resources and tools surrounding people's everyday lives so that they (we) can more confidently approach numeracy topics and ensure that this essential aspect of the curriculum is covered for LLN students.

The importance of numeracy skills was brought closer to me personally a week or so after Chris's workshop when I underwent surgery and stayed in hospital for a few days. In Chris's workshop at the VALBEC conference we were provided with everyday objects such as jelly snakes, smarties, origami paper, syringes, measuring cups and other bits and pieces which we were to use during the workshop. We scrutinised these objects with fascination while settling into the workshop space and Chris cautioned us, 'Please don't consume the objects on your table'. In hospital, on the other hand, the objects of scrutiny were my body parts: intimate objects too visceral to mention in an article about LLN teaching, yet fundamental to my life. In hospital, myriad tubes linked my body parts to devices expertly monitored by nurses.

My life depended on the nurses' skilful reading, recording, reporting, and translating of the numerical data revealed by the tubes and devices. Other hospital workers relied on numeracy skills as well: matching food to patients, maintaining correct food temperatures, mixing cleaning solutions safely, fixing electrical breakdowns – it's difficult to think of situations in the health system where numeracy



Jelly snakes and chocolate buttons: what's not to like about numeracy?

skills and the language of numeracy would be unnecessary. In fact, it's difficult to think of any system where numeracy skills would be redundant. Yet many of us find it difficult to include numeracy teaching and learning into our everyday language and literacy classes. In Chris's workshop I learned some important lessons about integrating numeracy in LLN teaching ...

Lesson #1: Numeracy is all-pervasive and personal

At the beginning of the workshop, Chris pointed out that, 'We DO maths'. Everyone is numerate in multiple ways. For example: getting to class on time is a complex task requiring reading timetables and sequencing and estimating the length of various tasks before arriving punctually at the correct location; cooking for two people or 20 is another complex task of manipulating ratios, multiplying and dividing, weighing, calculating volumes, setting temperatures and more. Knowing that humans have ineluctable and proximate relationships with their material world means that the resources and tools for developing and practising numeracy skills are always close at hand. Chris challenges students to figure out the cost of painting a room, or to write their favourite recipe so they can share catering ideas with their classmates.

Lesson #2: Numeracy is collaborative and creative

These examples demonstrate the inherently communal nature of numeracy. We need to be able to discuss numeracy-related issues – How much medicine should I take and for how long? How long does the paint take to dry? How many grams of chicken should be served per person? Numeracy talk forms a significant part of the buzz of workplaces, shops, kitchens and factories, and so numeracy learning lends itself to noisy, talkative collaborative classes. In Chris's workshop, we were tasked with the problem of folding a square of paper in half, but the folds were not allowed to cross the centre point. We worked together to solve the puzzle; I came up with a half-baked solution which my teammates (nicely) told me was wrong according to the task rules. They showed me some better solutions, but my favourite was from another table, four triangles pointing to the centre creating two squares side-by-side.

Lesson #3: Numeracy is practical

Chris asked us to consider the square folding task. 'Why did I give you this task?' We learned that steering students away from a 'static mindset' is probably the most important mission of effective numeracy teaching. Numeracy, like life, should sometimes be messy, complicated, unexpected and open-ended. The best strategies for taking students (and teachers) out of their static numeracy mindsets are tactics such as removing puzzle pieces, coming up with new solutions for old problems, searching for patterns amidst seeming randomness, and solving unpredictable problems. These strategies, in turn, promote teamwork, problem solving, and *discussion*.

Lesson #4: Discourse is as relevant to numeracy as it is to language and literacy

'Did I hear you say discussion?' the literacy tribes-people might ask. 'Now you're talking our language!' Chris turns our attention to the intricacies around the naming of certain symbols in English and how these names can be confusing for English learners. For example, teaching the notions of *half*, *third* and *quarter* is contentious, and we use many bewildering words and phrases to talk about the operations represented by the symbols $+$, $-$, \div , and \times . Mathematical symbols are a universal language that enables people to communicate abstract mathematical concepts across linguistic divides, and students will inevitably, down the track, learn the specific technical equations and numeracy terminologies of *their* chosen field of study.

Basic numeracy, on the other hand, is concerned with our everyday concrete material world. We need to communicate

with different people about the materials that surround us. We need to know the right questions to enlist support, or to confirm and get feedback, to solve problems and communicate using the grammar, lexis and discourse that best suits each different audience. In hospital I would hear nurses talking to each other in hushed tones about my case using the technical language of their field, while with me, reassuringly, they spoke about my body's performance in plain English. This is the numeracy we literacy teachers can teach confidently: how to communicate about the materials of our everyday world, the world we all inhabit, with the relevant people in different everyday situations. This is numeracy education.

Chris

I identify as a numeracy person. This does not mean I am not literate but that I think I would struggle with teaching literacy despite using it in all aspects of my life. I am not sure how I would develop the concepts of reading, writing and speaking to enable students to learn. This got me thinking about literacy teachers needing to teach numeracy. They identify as literacy people and despite using numeracy in all aspects of their lives, I often hear literacy teachers express concern about their ability to 'do' numeracy, let alone teach it. My aim in the workshop was to start the process of getting literacy teachers who need to teach numeracy more comfortable with their own abilities and to start thinking of basic numeracy concepts and what they mean.

The keynote speaker at the 2019 VALBEC conference, Kirke Olsen, spoke about our brains and making work more rewarding while helping our students learn. He mentioned that a student might come with preconceived ideas about how difficult school is that they learned from their parents or community. He said that even if the first day of school goes well, a student who is expecting school to be bad would still find fault with the day. Kirke said that this is how our brains work. This particularly applies to numeracy. It is very common to hear a person say that they never understood maths, that it is difficult and when would they use it, anyway? As a literacy person teaching numeracy, a teacher may need to overcome his or her own preconceived ideas as well as the students'. This is not an easy task so where do you start?

What is a half?

The workshop started with fractions, as fractions were identified as one of the 'problem' areas of numeracy with students. I asked the participants to use the jelly snakes

on the table to represent a half and three quarters and to use the chocolate buttons to represent two thirds. All of the participants could do this easily. I then asked, 'What is a half?' This created some lively discussion about dividing something into two bits and taking one of the bits. Was this a clear enough definition? Further clarification of the definition was to state that the bits had to be of equal length. How is this represented in maths symbols? These are the sorts of discussions that we need to have with students. While they may be able to show a half, they may not understand the meaning of the symbol '3/4'.

How different was it to divide the chocolate buttons into two thirds? Why was it necessary to use different ways of representing fractions? I spoke about static representation of fractions. Most of the fraction problems I have seen presented to students require them to divide a whole object, usually squares or circles, into parts. This can create issues for students. A student may be able to demonstrate a third or a fifth by dividing up a circle but will not then transfer that concept to showing a third or fifth of the people in the class.

As teachers, we assume because a student can demonstrate knowledge of fractions by colouring in part of a circle or square, they understand what a fraction is. This is not necessarily true. Students need to explore the concept of 3/5 (or any other fraction). They need to understand first the words 'denominator' and 'numerator' and then what they represent. They need to know that 3/5 represents three parts out of a total of five equal parts. How does the representation change if there are 10 or 15 objects? Is it still possible to demonstrate 3/5 with 15 objects? We need to have the conversations about what the maths representation is indicating. There needs to be a lot of talk about what is happening and why with mathematical concepts not just about how 'to do' the numeracy.

Everyday numeracy

It is very important to use a variety of ways of exploring numeracy concepts including concrete materials, discussion, paper-based examples and videos. It is also important to use everyday applications of the concepts that are familiar to students. For example, fractions are everywhere in cooking, shopping, fares and time. Students can often show 2/3 of a cup of flour or 1/2 price on a dress because they may be familiar activities. This can start to build their confidence with fractions, as they are often not aware that they have been working with fractions competently. If students then



Chris Tully in action at the VALBEC conference

explain why it is two-thirds of a cup or half price, it helps them cement the concepts in their mind. This should be in context. If possible, actually do the cooking and have students halve a recipe or cater for more people than stated in the recipe. Have them write their own recipes. This may be particularly challenging for some EAL students, if recipes are not part of their everyday life.

Importantly, when doing numeracy, make it relevant and real. For example, only use fractions that are in common use. When was the last time you saw 13/67? Constantly connect with what students already know and can do either formally or informally.

And my last advice is probably the most important of all: make numeracy learning fun!

Here are some resources for inspiration:

- <http://www.bbc.co.uk/skillswise/maths>
- <https://www.adultnumeracynetwork.org/resources/>
- Beth Marr's excellent project for supporting practitioners tasked with delivering adult numeracy education in adult settings; *Collaborative Numeracy* <https://bit.ly/2YnZ2An>
- See our review of Dave Tout's *Numeracy: Teaching maths in context* and a sample activity on p.39–40

Elizabeth Gunn has taught language, literacy and numeracy in a variety of settings around Australia and China. She currently teaches the Education Support course at Melbourne Polytechnic.

Chris Tully has worked in the numeracy field for the last 34 years including with first nations people, in industry, to low-level learners and with diploma and higher education learners. She currently coordinates Literacy and Numeracy Support at Melbourne Polytechnic.

Learning circles: a process of cultural change in teaching and learning

By Jennifer Coutts and Kerryn Durden

Diversitat is a not-for-profit organisation that provides many services to refugees and migrants in Geelong. It is also a Registered Training Organisation delivering both accredited and pre-accredited courses. Many adults from refugee backgrounds are enrolled in English as an Additional Language (EAL) at Diversitat.

In late 2018 EAL Program Manager, Mabel Msopero, and Team Leader, Kerryn Durden, agreed that something needed to change. It felt as though the EAL program was stuck on a treadmill. Why was this so?

1. Many students were from refugee backgrounds with no or low literacy in their own language.
2. Teachers and students had low expectations.
3. Non-progressing students were being re-enrolled.
4. A culture of co-dependency was evident.

Around this time an opportune professional development webinar was offered on the principles of adult learning. This was the refresher we needed to ask ourselves significant questions:

- Is our teaching student-centred?
- Are students involved in decision-making?

The next question was how to create change to enable us to answer the questions above in the affirmative.

Finding a possible solution

While researching, Kerryn read about the concept of student-led learning circles conducted outside of formal learning hours and felt that this could be adapted into our program (see links at the end of this article). To encourage students to become more independent and take more control of their learning, they could form student-led learning circles to work on self-selected projects together but within the classroom setting. The goal for 2019 would be the establishment of long-term learning circles of three to four students supporting each other and performing selected roles within the group.

The year started with chaos. A few teachers were not back from leave, so casual teachers were filling the gaps. As students were already unsettled, we decided this may be the best time to make a change. We took a deep breath and introduced learning circles. Timetabling allowed levels to merge so students from two different classes (i.e. Preliminary and Level 1; Level 2 and Level 3) worked together in initial learning circles. For the first two weeks of Term 1, students were placed into different learning

circles for an hour each day. Some students quickly embraced the change and enjoyed moving around and meeting new teachers and students. Others were more reluctant to move out of their comfort zone.

Below, Jenny reflects on her experiences of using learning circles in her class this year.

Implementing change

From day one, with a combination of Prelim and Level 1, I called the activity 'Learning Circles'. Students were mainly from Burma, Afghanistan, Iraq, African countries and Syria. I told them that this was their time to speak English. I organised students from different first language backgrounds to sit in 'circles' of three or four people facing each other. Students from Level One unsurprisingly took on the role of leader and encouraged others to interact. They started to speak, and only in English!

When teachers returned from leave, classes settled and learning circles continued but were organised within classes with just one level of learning. Teachers and students understood that learning circles were to be a part of the program but decided together how often they would happen and the time required.

After the first two weeks, all classes had set teachers. I was one of those teachers. My Prelim students understood the concept and were ready to continue learning circles within our class. I allocated a daily set time: 30 minutes prior to the lesson break so students could continue their conversations over coffee. Students organised themselves into random groups of three to four with speakers of different languages. I suggested relevant topics such as their family, house, hobbies, at the beach, summer, their first countries, Diversitat and Geelong. Often, they chose to accompany speech with illustration to assist their listeners' comprehension.

There were some challenges. More confident and advanced speakers were doing all the talking while others listened passively. I let this happen; I let go of control and observed.

More competent speakers became curious; they wanted to get to know the other students. So prior to each learning circle, I taught the class how to ask and answer simple questions, skills they practised together in their circles.

Students have noticed changes happening in their learning circles. Their comments include:

- Everybody speaks
- Other students push you to speak
- Students help other students
- Students use their strengths
- We talk and understand students
- We like speaking.

I share the class with another teacher and by the middle of Term 2, the changes we observed included improved interaction between all students and more willing participation in other group activities; a real sense of group spirit and the sense that students understand and respect each other and support each other to be successful; and that students have found their own voice in a group and have learned to speak up.

Learning circles in Levels 2 and 3 meet once a week with the same four to five students for the duration of each project. Learning circle members decide on a topic together. These have included: flags in Australia; Sydney; food; education; the internet pros and cons and greetings in different languages.

Reflection

This is some of the feedback we have received from students:

- The group plans, takes ideas, makes it interesting; everyone speaks; we have different roles
- We do a group presentation
- Cert Two and Three classes are together for presentations
- Teaches us patience
- Helps us work in a team
- Most students are happy
- Students help each other
- When learning English before (at a different RTO) I only talked if I was practising for a test
- I do more talking now because of learning circles.



Timing learning circles immediately before a lesson break meant that students could continue their discussions over coffee. Photo by Gradikaa on Unsplash

This has been a snapshot of how we initiated change in an attempt to adapt to different ways of teaching. Our message is to expect change to be gradual and involve passive as well as active resistance. People tend to go back to what they are used to, even when they think they are doing something different. Change needs continued reinforcement, encouragement and guidance.

It is still early days. Learning circles were only adopted at the start of 2019 to create a change in our program's learning culture; to eliminate the treadmill on which students and teachers were stuck. We value this opportunity to share with you the beginning of our story of cultural change and will continue to evaluate the learning as the story continues.

Links for further research:

<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/english-learning-circles-a-path-learner-independence>

<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/guide-setting-english-learning-circle>

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Kerryn Durden is an experienced teacher of English to adult migrants and refugees. She is currently the English Program Team Leader at Diversitat Training Geelong.

What's right with me? A strengths-based teaching approach for students of adult learning.

By Marie McLeod

If you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will always believe that it is stupid. – Albert Einstein

Educators who connect students with their strengths, positively impact on their stress levels and play an important role in cultivating wellbeing and buffering ill-being (Waters, 2015). Strengths-based teaching is a style of teaching based on positive psychology and neuroscience, that seeks to identify and cultivate positive qualities, positive states and positive processes in students.

This article looks specifically at why and how teachers of adult literacy might support their students to identify and cultivate their positive qualities – their strengths.

Getting started with positive qualities: identifying and cultivating strengths

In its simplest form, a strength is something we're good at and enjoy doing: natural capacities that we yearn to use, that enable authentic expression, and that energise us. They might comprise our talents, interests, resources and/or character.

When people use their strengths, they feel like the 'real me' is coming through. They're things people look forward to doing, feel absorbed while doing them and invigorated

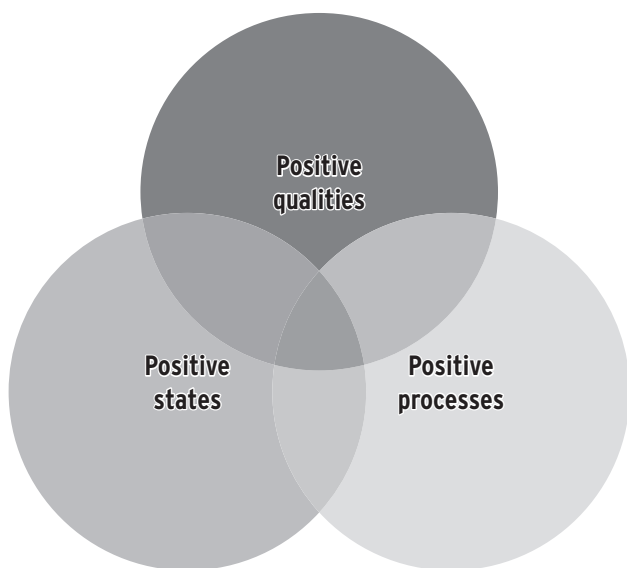
and fulfilled afterwards. They are where people's greatest successes are most likely to happen and where people tend to experience enormous growth. Our strengths are the natural way our brain is wired to work and when we're using our strengths, everything feels easier.

Subjective wellbeing is significantly predicted by the degree to which a person knows and uses their strengths (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan & Minhas, 2011). School-based strengths interventions, with students ranging from primary through to secondary school in the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, have found that helping students to identify their strengths increases hope, life satisfaction, school engagement, self-esteem and positive affect as well as reducing negative affect (McQuaid & Lawn, 2014). Could similar results be seen for adult learners?

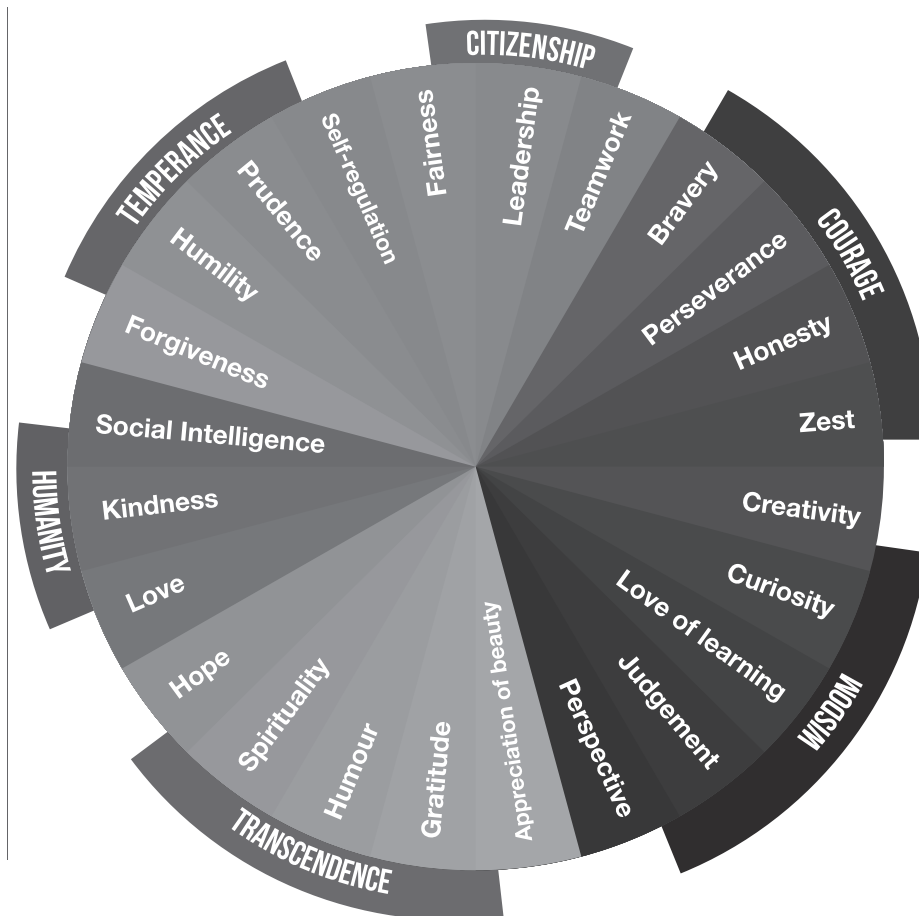
When it comes to wellbeing and the ability to individually flourish, not only do people who use their strengths report lower levels of stress, they also report higher levels of happiness, lower levels of depression, better physical health, and higher levels of satisfaction with their lives. The more hours each day people use their strengths, the less likely they are to experience worry, stress, anger, sadness, or physical pain; and the more likely they are to have ample energy, feel well-rested, be happy, smile or laugh a lot, learn something interesting, and be treated with respect (McQuaid & Lawn, E, 2014). It appears that developing our strengths is good for our mental and physical health, both of which make it easier to navigate the natural highs and lows we all experience.

Students who are able to cope with stress and navigate adversity are better placed to engage in learning, show up with confidence and be able to plan a pathway forward for their future.

Moreover, developing strengths builds on neural pathways that are already dominant in our brains, advancing us towards the estimated 8,000 to 10,000 hours of deliberate practice required for mastery. Conversely, overcoming a weakness requires us to literally rewire our brains, needing substantially more practice and effort to enhance poor neural connections (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer,



The three pillars of strengths-based teaching



The VIA Character Strengths (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). Graphic by PopSy

1993). Students who can capitalise on their strengths are, therefore, likely to have a head start when it comes to accomplishing their learning goals and reaching their greatest potential.

So how might educators of adult learners help students to discover their strengths: what they're good at AND love doing?

How to help students discover their strengths

There are two major ways in which educators can become more aware of their students' strengths. The first way is through asking students to take a strength survey. The Values in Action (VIA) Survey (<http://www.viacharacter.org>) has been developed by teams of psychologists to ensure that the surveys are valid, reliable and free. Students of adult learning could be invited to take this survey as part of their learning to discover (or rediscover) what they are good at and what they value, giving them language to describe themselves in positive terms that they could apply in interviews or on their resumes.

An assessment survey is a tool, not a magic oracle –
Professor Chris Peterson

One drawback of the VIA Survey for the adult literacy educator is that its length and the complexity of its language might be disconcerting for adults who struggle with literacy. So, how might we share the value of knowing and using one's strengths with students without the use of a survey tool? After all the survey is a tool to help us discover our strengths but it's not the only way. As educators who align with the ideas of strengths-based teaching, there's lots you can do to bring this to life in your classroom:

Investigate your own strengths

Learn and live this for yourself first, before you try to teach and embed it with students. Start by taking the VIA survey, discovering your unique profile of strengths and building an understanding and language that you can then begin to share in your classroom.

Once you've taken the free VIA survey (it will take you about 10 minutes) you will get a list of the strengths

in order based on the way you responded to the survey questions. The top five are your signature strengths. Start by getting to know these strengths more deeply and understanding how they show up in your own life. How do they help you be at your best? How do you feel on days when you get to use them compared to days when you're having to do things that are not your strengths? Chances are your best days, when you experience your greatest success are when you're using your strengths.

You can find a fuller description of the character strengths on the 'Character Strengths' tab of the VIA website: <https://www.viacharacter.org/character-strengths>. You'll also find a handy poster you can download at the bottom of the page called Strengths by Virtue Graphic. Print this out and put it on the fridge. Take it to the classroom once you're ready to introduce the idea of strengths to students.

Taking it to the classroom

Before you share the strengths poster, you could ask students to write down five things they're bad at and hate doing. Give them two minutes. Then ask them to write down five things they're good at and love doing. Ask them to observe which list is longer and was easier to write. They will uncover the fact that we have a bias towards knowing more about what's wrong, than right with us. You can then introduce the idea that it's more powerful to know and use our strengths than to know and fix our weaknesses.

You might then share the strengths poster/list and ask that they explore it in groups. You may need to help them understand what each strength means and provide an example – you'll find help with this on the 'Character Strengths' tab on the VIA website.

Ask students to circle which strengths they think would be their signature strengths. Ask them to share this with others who know them best and get their input.

Discussing and reflecting

A subsequent discussion might be around what happens when we over- or underplay our strengths (see 'Can you have too much of a good thing?' below). You could provide example of things you might see happen in the classroom to illustrate this. For example: when Sam is too honest, he upsets others who see him as tactless; or when Amir is using her perseverance to stick at something, but others are ready to move on; or when Demetri uses humour too much or at the wrong time, others get annoyed. You can share that a respectful way for us to

give feedback to each other is to ask for strengths to be 'turned up' or 'turned down'.

You might be able to play all or some of this video to the class: The Science of Character <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kq-rOeLLciE>. It explores both character strengths and growth mindset which is another useful and related concept.

As students prepare for exams, interviews or are going through a transition or struggle, it might be useful to ask them to reflect on which strengths they could call on to help them. For example, kindness might be directed towards ourselves or others, courage might help us step outside our comfort zone, social intelligence might help us to read others in an interview, perseverance might help us stick through something hard.

Strength spotting

Another important way for educators to become aware of students' strengths is through the practice of strength spotting. Strength spotting is a process of observation that specifically looks to identify strengths in oneself and others. This will become easier for you as you build the knowledge and language of strengths but what will you look for?

The 24 VIA character strength exist in all of us but there will be around five strengths that are your 'signature strengths'. Signature strengths are the strongest or most prominent of our strengths. They are likely to be the strengths that matter most to you, that are most central to your personal identity. Three key features are common in signature strengths called the 3 E's:

Essential: the strength feels essential to who you are as a person.

Effortless: when you enact the strength you feel natural and effortless.

Energising: using the strength uplifts you and leaves you feeling happy, in balance and ready to take on more. (Niemiec, 2012)

You will likely find it easiest and most natural to spot the strength in others when those strengths coincide with your own signature strengths; we tend to have a bias towards what we value. Try to become familiar with your lesser strengths and how they add value. Then counter your strengths bias by deliberately spotting those strengths in others.

Support students to learn more about their strengths, use them more often to help them shine and in moments of struggle. Students may also learn about the strengths of their classmates, spotting and reporting strengths use with each other. This creates a deeper sense of knowing and reduces the expectation for each student of being 'good at everything'.

Some ideas for developing a strengths-based learning environment

Create visual cues and place them around the room (contact marie@popsy.com.au for a poster of VIA strengths or download from the VIA website)

Check in with students and at the end of the day about what strengths they used that day or those they could have used to help them.

Put on your 'strengths goggles' and encourage other students to do the same (look for the five signature strengths outlined above).

Build knowledge and vocabulary of strengths by supporting students to more deeply understand what is meant by the words used to describe each of the 24 character strengths. This gives them words to use to describe themselves positively in interviews etc.

Give strengths feedback by being specific about the strength you see being used and how it helps that student or others.

Create opportunities for students to use or display their strengths over the day. For example those with *love of learning* might share something they've learned that's relevant to the lesson. Those with *zest* might be asked to speak in front of the class or show prospective students around, those with *kindness* might take the role of comforting others if they struggle, those with *perseverance* might be reminded to call upon that when times are tough.

Can you have too much of a good thing?

While strengths are just that – they're things we're good at and love doing, we can also overdo them. You may observe in yourself and your students that the times of greatest struggle or frustration are caused by a strength being over- or underplayed. For example, people with the strength of honesty often have experiences of being too blunt with others, people with the strength of humour will have a story about how they've made a joke at the

wrong time, and people with the strength of kindness or love tell us they tend to give and give and give to everybody else until there is nothing left for themselves and they're completely run down. You may find many of the weaknesses you identify in yourself or in students are strengths being overplayed. This creates a wonderful opportunity to give feedback in ways that preserve confidence. For example, you could say, 'Perhaps you're using too much honesty right now, and it's getting others off side?' or 'Perhaps your strength of prudence is making it hard for you to make a decision, perhaps you could dial it back a bit?'

The 'golden mean' of strengths

The good news is that when we get our strengths just right for the situation we're in and the results we want to achieve, we hit the 'golden mean' of our strengths. It's at this moment we enter the state psychologists call 'flow'. This is the feeling of being 'in the zone' or 'at one with the music', when we're completely absorbed in what we're doing, often losing all track of time but afterwards having a real sense of satisfaction about what we've accomplished (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991).

The art of developing your strengths lies in finding this golden mean more frequently, as we go about our lives.

Building wellbeing

Should we bother with strengths and strategies to build student wellbeing and wellbeing literacy in adult learning settings?

It is my firm belief that educators need to consider health, wellbeing and flourishing as equally important if not more so than academic learning objectives. This is perhaps especially important for adult learners who have come back to learn later in life with some potential fear about learning and learning institutions. I have no doubt that it is a combination of individual characteristics and strengths, as well as protective factors within the education setting and wider community that enable students to learn, flourish and reach for their dreams.

Educational institutions can play a vital role in building resilience and promoting wellbeing in addition to their core business, which is to teach so that students can learn. At the heart of education, whether you are five or 50, is that you come out the other side, not only with new wisdom but with the solid belief that you can apply that learning to your life, keep learning and see this as

a pathway to becoming what you most want to be and do in the world. Knowing deep in our minds and hearts what we are naturally good at and love doing lights us up, engages us and helps us to reach our potential with greater ease. Connecting students to their strength is to empower them, to help them discover their unique super powers. What a gift!

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Open Forum

I always have plan B: reflections on teaching in a maximum security prison

By Catherine Clancy

I teach adult literacy / VCAL in a prison. When people first heard that I had taken this job their primary concern was always physical safety (and frankly that was a big question for me too). The reality is that there are systems and processes in place to manage the safety and security of prisoners, corrections staff, and staff from other agencies (including teachers). As I move through the prison, I am aware but not worried. I wear a uniform that identifies me as a teacher, and prisoners recognise that we are not part of the corrections system as such.

People who know me well were concerned for my psychological and emotional safety. They know my abhorrence of violence and aggression in any form, and my dislike of prison-based dramas. I have described the bluestone of Pentridge Prison as being soaked with misery and violence. They also know how I engage with my adult literacy students. This aspect has in fact been the biggest issue for me. More on that later.

My primary role involves working with young men aged 18 to 25 who are enrolled in VCAL. The focus is on literacy, numeracy and work-related skills. I work with distinct cohorts, with the majority of my time spent in a young offender unit. The other class is drawn from across the mainstream prison population. I also work one-to-one with students who are confined to their cells 23 hours a day. Students can and do move between these cohorts.

A significant proportion of the prisoners are remanded, not sentenced, and this accounts for the majority of my students. Consequently, a student could be in my course for only a week before being transferred or released, or any period longer than that. It has taken quite a while for me to come to terms with that in relation to what I can hope for students to achieve.

Knowing my students

Who are these men? The following doesn't describe the whole prison population but accounts for perhaps three quarters of my students. It isn't intended to make excuses; it

describes the reality of the teaching challenge. My students have diverse backgrounds and learning experiences: most come from underprivileged situations (including inter-generational disadvantage); they have completed from Year 6 to Year 10 at school; some were successful at school, many were not; the younger ones have often never had a paid job; most were born in Australia, in some cases their parents having arrived in the 1990s; some are indigenous; some are parents; some have no family support or contact. Some students don't have the literacy skills required to make simple requests or complete forms.

A number of the students have barriers to learning. On any day a class may include students affected by: mental health issues (sometimes diagnosed and treated for the first time in the corrections system); learning difficulties; vision problems; acquired brain injury; intellectual disability; behavioural disorders; damage related to ice use; chronic trauma; or poor experience of prior learning. Students without these problems tend not to be in VCAL.

Why are they in prison? I don't ask and I don't want to know. No matter how hard I try to not be influenced, I am only human. When they are in my class, they are learners, not prisoners. Most don't want to tell me anyway.

Why do they come to class? Do they really want to learn? My dream is a room full of people motivated and ready to learn. That doesn't describe many of my students. In the young offender unit, there is a requirement to work or to participate in education. Men who haven't completed school are encouraged to do VCAL. So, they may be in class under duress. Attending education can be a social occasion for mainstream prisoners – they get to meet friends or people outside their own unit. It can be a way of alleviating boredom or escaping the confines of the unit or isolation. Some are in it for how it will look in court. I am often asked, 'Will I get a certificate? Will it impress the judge?'. When they learn how much work is involved in a VCAL unit they may opt out. But sometimes it's what we want – a student eager to grasp an opportunity to learn.

These men have often lacked good role models and may have no concept of what their future could be as a worker, partner and father. Their knowledge of society is limited – perhaps unsurprisingly given their age – and I find myself often wondering, ‘How can they not know that?’ Then again, they have a lot of knowledge of areas I am happily unfamiliar with. Their lack of critical thinking when engaging with the media generates some interesting discussion.

The rhythm of prison life also influences who turns up in class on any one day: visits; legal meetings; court; drug, alcohol, violence and other programs; medical; lockdown or separation can all impact attendance. You never know which version of the student is going to turn up and whether there is something going on in their unit, with their family, etcetera. Flexibility is the key – I always have a plan B.

So, what is it like to be a teacher in this environment?

I have been in this role for nine months, and teaching adults as a job for five years. The previous 30 years were spent in industry in technical and managerial roles. To say that I suffered culture shock in this role is an understatement. It was relatively easy to acclimatise to the physical environment. Being referred to by staff and prisoners as the generic ‘Miss’ seemed quaint, and the copious use by staff (male and female) of ‘love’, ‘darling’ and ‘darl’ positively antiquated. The norms of behaviour were not those of the corporate environment I had left.

I had to change from an online learning environment to a paper-based, internet-free one. There is no internet access in classrooms or units, and videos and other digital material can’t easily be embedded in learning materials. Given the age of the people I am teaching this is an added challenge. Naturally, curriculums often expect students to research information on the internet. This isn’t possible and so I now have a trolley full of printouts to take to class. This increases teaching preparation time as I try to ensure relevance to individual students, both for motivation and practical learning purposes. Students don’t become as independent as the curriculums aim them to be. Not being able to instantly look something up in the Oxford Dictionary app on the phone is unfortunate, but I never have to ask a student to put away their phone or stop playing a game on the computer. Perhaps the biggest negative is that when an opportunity arises to hook a student in, I can’t act on it immediately

by finding something relevant to read or discuss. Swings and roundabouts.

There are restrictions on the materials that can be brought into the prison and that requires rethinking about delivery. Creative use of teaching aids for numeracy has become more creative (for example working without scissors). There are also topics to be avoided as a necessary corollary of not knowing the reason a student is in prison and what might trigger an unhelpful reaction or situation. It can take weeks for some students to open up about their interests and we don’t always have that long.

Before I started, I was very wary of exposing a person to ridicule or bullying when their skill level became obvious. However, in some cases prisoners are quite open about their skills. I have had the enormously satisfying opportunity to work for some months with a dyslexic student, who could read blue *Pageturner* books by the time he was transferred elsewhere. Unlike in other places, there is sometimes an opportunity to work one-to-one with students who need that. Classes are small, but the makeup and timetable constantly changes as new students arrive who perhaps are too disruptive to be in the same group as a student with learning disabilities.

Challenges and rewards

There are particular challenges in establishing the rapport and relationships needed for my students to learn, while protecting my emotional self and maintaining the required professional boundaries. There is a tension between finding out how to engage a person in learning, and all the risks that entails for them, and not becoming overwhelmed by their life stories. I don’t know how to teach literacy without linking it to the personal. One Work Related Skills unit in VCAL involves the learner investigating their potential career options. When I work with a student over a number of weeks, I inevitably learn more of their history. While not excusing any crime they may have committed, I struggle to remain unaffected that these are the stories of some young people in our community. I am also affected by their lack of hope or vision of a fulfilling life.

‘Professional boundaries’ takes on an additional meaning in a prison. In addition to the normal boundaries when dealing with students there are extra precautions related to safety and security of the prison. This is something to be mindful of, especially with longer term students. I recently learned that prisoners can ‘groom’ staff. We need to find

ways of declining to answer questions without disrupting the trust established.

It has taken a long time to settle into a rhythm and set of expectations for myself and students that doesn't leave me emotionally and psychologically exhausted at the end of the day. I have had to change my expectations of how students will behave in class. I have to not take personally the unwillingness or inability to engage. I have learned to work through the first few weeks with a new student who challenges and disrupts, repeating past patterns of behaviour, without becoming frustrated. If I arrive for class to find the unit locked down, I adapt. I no longer print whole workbooks for a student because more likely than not they will leave.

I still have expectations that the students can learn. However, I have reached a place, after nine months, where I can leave a class knowing that if the student is gone the next day, we have still achieved something. Maybe this has been the first time they have not felt uncomfortable in class or have felt respected as a learner. Hopefully at their next prison they will engage in learning. They may have positively engaged in learning, maybe even failed at something without negative consequences. Maybe their story has been acknowledged and not judged. Maybe they have learned something (anything – I'm not fussy). Maybe for the first time someone has asked about their job aspirations.

Being in prison doesn't stop students making bad decisions. Where the schedule allows, I continue to work with a student that has been moved to a management unit where they are confined to their cell. I may work with them 'through the trap', i.e. through the opening in the cell door. As teachers we don't judge or concern ourselves with what is going on outside the classroom; we work with the corrections officers to ensure we are safe in our engagement with prisoners.

Going back to the concerns people had about me working in a maximum security prison, the only way I can work there is to wear blinkers. I don't think about what happens between prisoners and between officers and prisoners. I



Photo by Matthew Ansley on Unsplash

carry a radio so I hear emergency calls, but I focus only on whether it impacts a unit I am about to go to. As teachers we are not part of the system that arrests, convicts and confines people.

I do a lot of professional development, reading about ADHD, autism, behavioural disorders and the impact of trauma on learning. I'm getting my head around how to maximise the chance that a student is present and attentive enough to engage, despite the environment. There is no chance I will exhaust my opportunity to learn and develop my skills while working in this environment, which suits me. The harder task is to take care of myself physically and emotionally so that I have the stamina and resilience I need. I'm getting help with that, because, when all is said and done, this is a job with the potential to be the most rewarding one I have had.

Catherine Clancy teaches adult literacy and VCAL in a prison in Victoria. She trained as a metallurgist and worked in the steel industry for 30 years. Meanwhile she volunteered in community-based adult literacy programs in NSW and Victoria and was Chair of Carlton Neighbourhood Learning Centre. After holding a range of technical and leadership positions, she left the industry and retrained to follow her passion for adult literacy. She started teaching in 2015 and took up her current position in 2018.

In Conversation

Working with refugee communities in Central Victoria

An interview with Robyn Spandonide

Robyn Spandonide won the 2018 Victorian Learn Local Practitioner Award for her work as English Program Coordinator at Loddon Campaspe Multicultural Services (LCMS). *Fine Print* caught up with her at the LCMS office on Bendigo's main thoroughfare to find out more about her and the work she does with refugee groups in Central Victoria.



What career path led you to work with refugee women in Bendigo?

I feel really proud and lucky to be born in Australia where we've got diversity all around us and I've always been drawn to working in that multicultural space. I think in Australia we want to be welcoming and inclusive and supportive and English language is one part of that, of empowering people.

I began my career as a generalist primary teacher in Melbourne before going overseas to teach English in South Korea and in the New Territories in Hong Kong. Back in Melbourne, I picked up a short-term position working with two children from Burma. Through working with those students, I was inspired by the opportunity to go for a scholarship at the University of Melbourne specialising in TESOL. So that's how the journey started.

I moved to the Northern Territory and worked with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who had basic literacy levels, then I returned to Victoria and discovered the Learn Local Network through LCMS.

I really enjoy the flexibility in the pre-accredited space. We can create programs that are quite tailored to the needs of particular students and because most of the classes are free, you know if a program is working or not. If you've hit the right mark and you've found something that meets the community's needs, if you've had the consultation, then programs really thrive, and they thrive on their own.

Can you tell us about some of the programs at LCMS?

A beautiful example of a thriving program is the South Sudanese Women's Group named White Nile. It meets once a week to learn English and members bring food to share. The South Sudanese community is an emerging community in Bendigo but within that community there

are different ethnic groups (or tribes), of which some groups have a history of conflict back in South Sudan. When we met with members of the community to discuss capacity-building programs, we asked if English language learning would be useful and they agreed. They have now expressed that if they saw each other in the street before White Nile began, they might wave and say 'Hi', but had no real reason to connect. Now they come together each week and other programs have grown out of that connection.

There's also the Mums and Bubs Learn English class. It's a group that has been meeting every Thursday for over three years. That came about because women with young children wanted a place to connect with other women in the community and sought access to English classes with a tailored environment, for example if they were breastfeeding or wanted to bring young children to classes.

Our Starting Work in Australia course has also been really successful. It engages learners from refugee backgrounds who have never worked in Australia and have mostly had no experience of formal education or paid work prior to arriving in Australia. In 2017, over 70% of learners in that program gained employment and most of the others went on to TAFE or were raising families.

It's not always clear-cut short-term pathways; everyone we work with has goals, so something we're always trying to work towards is finding out how we can best support them with whatever their goals may be. When people first arrive, it's survival English: how to speak to a doctor; how to make a phone call; how to read the prices in the supermarket;

but after people have settled in for a while, they see the opportunities that are here and can be really excited by those freedoms for their children or for themselves. LCMS is a beautiful place to work in because of that – people are often quite optimistic and enthusiastic about the future.

What makes a program successful?

Building relationships and connections are really at the core of our programs. As the majority of people in our classes have come from a very limited or disrupted experience of education and literacy, it is crucial that we offer a safe and supportive environment to build confidence as learners. We do this through a variety of ways such as warm greetings, assisting with personal goal setting, having open communication for feedback and self-reflection, working closely with bi-cultural workers and volunteers. I believe the success of a program is truly a team effort.

In terms of literacy skills, I tailor the programs to be as relevant as possible to the group. I use role-play and conversation cards, categorising and comprehension activities and word games. As some of our programs involve women attending with children, I use strategies such as in-class and home tutors to support the students and I plan activities that can be self-paced so that if women need to attend to their children during the class they will not be disadvantaged. We organise guest speakers, incursions and excursions, which help to build connections with the wider community as well as further education and employment opportunities.

What are the advantages of being a small organisation?

People can come in, make themselves a cuppa, hang out for a bit, chat, ask a question. They don't have to come in and have a formal appointment. The beauty of being a small space is that people do just drop in and they can say things like, 'I'm not sure about this car insurance.' Sometimes people can feel reliant on a son or daughter or another member of their community to help with filling in forms, so coming here offers another alternative. If there's a volunteer available, and we work towards having someone here every day, then they can help with filling in a form or making a phone call.

This sort of help is part of capacity building; instead of just saying, 'Sure, we'll do it,' we work on a strength-based approach. If someone is ready to make that phone call then we'll talk about it with them, we'll sit next to them and we



The Mums and Bubs group offers English language learning in an environment tailored for mothers of young children.



The White Nile group has given disparate South Sudanese communities in Bendigo opportunities to connect with each other.

can help but they'll be the person to make the phone call. It takes more time, but in the long-term people become more independent.

Are there particular challenges that refugees face in regional Victoria?

Isolation is a problem and it can be combined with accessibility issues. If someone is reliant on public transport in Bendigo it can take a really long time to visit friends and families in a nearby suburb because you have to catch the bus into the centre of town and then out again. And then there's also a sense of isolation from the wider community. I remember a lady in the Hazara community telling me, 'I just feel like everyone's busy with their own families and sometimes it's really hard here, but I can't really ask for help.' So even though she's very close to her community, she can't get the support she might need.

Then there's discrimination. In places that people don't identify as being diverse, even if it is, stereotyping can be quite strong and even well-meaning people can spread unhelpful stereotypes about community groups. For example, people might say a particular community group is very quiet and passive, or they're all friendly and hardworking. Saying an entire culture is friendly is a positive stereotype, but what happens when a woman from that community reports domestic violence? Does she get the same support if everyone in the community is supposed to be friendly?

And if I hear an employer use stereotypes like 'hard working' and 'passive' I wonder if those employees know their rights and if they're being treated fairly. Are they being listened to? I do think that is changing though, and employers are starting to ask, 'How can we better support workers?' with people actively looking for a more diverse workforce.

What do you think is driving that change?

In our organisation we see change driven because of people like Sylvia Phan, who is an employment coordinator with Multicultural Services. Sylvia is heavily involved in the employment support and advocacy area and promoting the benefits of employing people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

You have to look at things like, if someone has been looking after a family of 11, cooking and cleaning for them, or if they've been an elephant herder for 20 years, how does that translate into a standard resume? In a job interview without an interpreter you might not see the best potential in a person, especially if the person has a beginning level of English. Sometimes the interview questions require an

academic type of English when the job doesn't actually require that. More employers are becoming aware of that and seeing where they need to be more inclusive and culturally competent.

Educating the wider community

A local food services company had employed people from different community groups and the leadership team asked if there was anything they could do better. They invited Sylvia and me to do a cultural competency workshop and they did a workplace audit to see if people were feeling included, and if they were being treated equally.

We've run workshops through Bendigo Volunteer Resource Centre, and within local schools we ran a workshop about refugees and asylum seekers and on discrimination and stereotyping. It is great to see the feedback from the kids. They say things like, 'I didn't realise that Bendigo was so diverse.' There are over 30 communities in Bendigo and that often takes people by surprise. People say, 'I want to put more effort into this, to be more inclusive, I want to find out more, I'll notice when someone is being left out. I've got those Karen and South Sudanese girls in my soccer team and I would like to speak to them.' Just simple things like that, but these are significant steps at breaking down stereotypes and normalising multiculturalism.

Visit the Loddon Campaspe Multicultural Services Facebook page to see a short video about the White Nile program and other videos made by LCMS participants.

Robyn was interviewed by Deryn Mansell, *Fine Print* editor.

Original contributions to knowledge

An interview with Winnie Dunn and Mohammed Ahmad from Sweatshop: Western Sydney Literacy Movement

On its website, Sweatshop describes itself as ‘... a literacy movement based in Western Sydney which is devoted to empowering groups and individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds through training and employment in creative and critical writing initiatives.’ (<http://sweatshop.ws/movement/>)

This piqued the *Fine Print* Editorial Committee’s interest: here was a publishing powerhouse proudly identifying as a literacy movement and honouring voices from communities that many of our readers work with. Sweatshop kindly provided a copy of its most recent publication, *Sweatshop Women*, for us to review (See pp 37–8 of this issue) but we thought you would like to know more about how the publication came about. So, *Fine Print* caught up with Dr Michael Mohammed Ahmad and Winnie Dunn, Sweatshop Director and General Manager respectively, at Better Read than Dead Bookshop in Newtown, Sydney, in July.

What is Sweatshop and what is its connection to literacy?

Mohammed: Sweatshop is a literacy movement devoted to empowering people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds through reading, writing and critical thinking. Literacy is not the ability to put words together but the ability to pull words apart. So, literacy is tied to critical thinking.

Originally, Sweatshop was based at Western Sydney University. Universities bring prestige but can become elite and inaccessible. We are about supporting marginalised communities so now we’re at I.C.E (Information and Community Exchange), a community arts organisation in Parramatta.

One of the discussions we’ve been having is about the intersection between gender and race. As an Arab-Australian Muslim man there’s a lot I can do but it became clear that there needed to be a space just for women that was self-determined. Winnie was the perfect leader for that and in 2016 we got a grant from Create NSW for a program exclusively for culturally and linguistically diverse women.



Mohammed Ahmad and Winnie Dunn at I.C.E. Photo by Nate Palmer

Both the women’s collective and the bigger Western Sydney writers’ group serve multiple purposes. Publication is one aspect, but they can work as really fantastic support groups or just groups for developing your writing because you like the art. At the centre of it all, though, is writing. They’re not therapy groups or emotional support groups, we’re always going back to creative writing as an artform that you have to develop.

The written text, it has a longevity to it, so we always try to produce publications to put in peoples’ hands. But so many of our writers come from oral traditions so we also do video, performance, podcasts ... it’s a culturally diverse group, so every kind of imaginable form of creative expression.

How did *Sweatshop Women* come about?

Winnie: We ran a couple of test workshops with women who were already part of Sweatshop but I was just regurgitating information that I was taught by my mentor, Mohammed, and that the women had been taught as well so it became clear that we needed a fresh audience.

I made a callout for women of colour in Western Sydney interested in a woman-exclusive workshop and we got a great response. I think because 2016 and early 2017 was the #metoo movement and there was a global response to women telling their own stories and women being believed and trusted when they spoke out against patriarchy and racism. The first workshop had about 30 women of colour.

We've heard the terms 'women of colour' and 'people of colour' used more frequently lately. Why is that?

Mohammed: 'People of colour' is a very big, encompassing term, it's a very American term. The term we usually use in Australia is 'culturally and linguistically diverse', but the problem with that term is, sometimes people take it a bit too literally. We have met people who are part of the dominant hegemony in Australia but will say 'I'm culturally and linguistically diverse because I'm part Greek,' for example.

It's tricky, there's no disrespect to someone who says they're Polish, not white, but 'whiteness' is a unique term that even the term 'Anglo-Celtic' doesn't encompass. Ghassan Hage, an anthropologist at the University of Melbourne, defines it as 'a fantasy of cultural dominance'. In eighteenth-century Australia, the Irish were the 'other' but today if an Irish crime takes place it's not an Irish crime, the way a Muslim crime or a black crime or an indigenous crime is racialised. So, what we learn about race through Ghassan Hage's analysis, is that it's a kind of capital, or wealth, that can be accumulated.

The politics of Sweatshop doesn't come out of a vacuum. Five years ago, 95% of the capital that the organisation accumulated went to the three white writers within our movement; since then we had to take an affirmative stance. When we're not self-determined and when we're allowing this sort of fluidity, very clear patterns of privilege reveal themselves. It's not like some evil white racist came to our group and said 'I'm going to rob you all,' it's just that the machine we live in is broken.

Winnie: Also, at the heart of the idea of having a women of colour collective is the idea that mainstream feminism is not inclusive; it tends to erase a lot of race politics. Alice Walker created the term 'womanism'. She understood that identifying as a woman of colour and a feminist tended to erase the race aspect of what it meant to be a woman and a woman of colour. Creating the space for women of colour outside of mainstream white feminism is a really central part of Sweatshop Women.

Could you tell us a little about how the Sweatshop Women workshops evolved?

Winnie: At the first workshop I read out a piece of bad writing from the *New Yorker* and tried to get them to tell me why it was bad. Some said there was something a bit off about it, some didn't think it was bad, they didn't understand why I was reading it out to critique it. And then we critiqued the piece together.

Then I got some of the women to read their work out and I would usually stop them at about the first sentence and would tell them how to fix it and they would say, 'But I haven't read the whole thing,' and I would say, 'It's ok, I can see by the first line that you're very emerging.' There was a dialogue happening between women of colour which was very unique and special. Very quickly they learned to write detailed, nuanced stories about themselves which was a new thing for them because nobody had told them they could do that or that people would want to read a story like that.

In 2017, workshops happened once a month with a guest facilitator who was a published woman of colour: women like Randa Abdel-Fattah, Michelle de Kretser – big names in Australian literature. The guest facilitator would do a presentation, they would talk about their experience in the writing industry, how they got published, their advice to young, emerging writers, then take questions. They would also give feedback on the women's writing.

Now we have fortnightly workshops. The system is that they come in, we sit in a circle, a couple of writers read, I ask a couple of the women to give feedback on that piece of writing and then I give more detailed feedback. The women who don't read that fortnight, they tend to learn from the editorial exchange.

Does everyone at the workshop want to be published?

Some women just wanted the space – they're interested in writing and learning how to write but for some of them, publication wasn't really their main focus, they just wanted other women of colour to talk to, to be around and to learn from. But the publication was always the focus of the workshops.

As Mohammed said earlier, the Sweatshop groups serve multiple purposes. For example, this year there were the terrible massacres in Christchurch and the bombings in Sri Lanka. After the Christchurch incident, Maryam Azam, who's a Pakistani-Australian Muslim poet, ran the



Winnie Dunn with Maryam Azam at Better Read Than Dead. Maryam Azam's poetry collection *The Hijab Files* is published by Giramondo Publishing.

workshop. Anybody who wasn't Muslim in that workshop didn't say anything for the two hours. We just listened and had a small donation box for the victims. It was a space for the Muslim women to talk about their experiences of being Muslim women of colour in Australia and read their writing in a place where there wasn't any interruption from someone outside that community, to reclaim the narrative about Muslim Australians at that time and throughout history.

After the Sri Lankan bombings, all the Sri Lankan writers got together. They did an informal panel, where they spoke about their writing, about their experiences, spoke about the history of Sri Lanka and what it meant in relation to Australia. Again, anyone who wasn't Sri Lankan Australian, we didn't say anything for the two hours and just let them have that space.

Why publish?

Winnie: It's about creating an original contribution to knowledge. Mainstream Australian literature is very monocultural; it misses out a lot of the communities that make up Australia and what it looks like today when you walk outside and look around. What *Sweatshop Women* tries to showcase is that your stories are important, and your experiences are important and the way that you write them is just as important as the experience.

So what I try to do with a lot of my writers is try to get them to feel comfortable writing very specific stories that are true about themselves but not necessarily factual about themselves and then to get them to write them in a creative way that makes that original contribution to knowledge.

Mohammed: Ninety percent of books published in Australia are written by white writers; 90% of what is taught in schools is white. For us it's about trying to subvert that conditioned way of thinking – trying to undo that Eurocentric, predominantly middle-class way of imagining your reality. We dig into that: Why are you writing this story? How is what you're speaking about based on anything you know about? The more you do that, the more you find that the writer doesn't know what they're saying and doesn't know the reality they're speaking about.

Then you try to get them to speak about their reality and the more detail they create the more specific their narrative becomes, the more it accidentally becomes so culturally specific that it becomes them. So it's not like we're trying to get them to write about being brown, we're trying to get them to be specific about something that they know about and the natural result is that you get these beautiful, culturally and linguistically diverse pieces of literature that have never been produced in Australia before.

It's about empowering young people of colour to think critically, develop literature, and then for me and Winnie, putting as much pressure on the industry as we can to get them to diversify what constitutes Australian literature. It's changing – look at the books on the bookshelves in Better Read than Dead; it's so much more colourful now than it was when I was growing up.

This interview took place just before Winnie participated in a 'writers in conversation' event with fellow Sweatshop member and Pakistani-Australian poet, Maryam Azam at Better Read Than Dead Bookshop in Newtown, Sydney. During their conversation, Maryam made this observation about representations of diversity in Australia:

A case in point: Randa Abdel-Fattah is a writer of Muslim background writing books like *Does My Head Look Big in This?* I've had people say, 'We have Randa already, we have a Muslim Australian writer already, why do we need more? She represents them all.' This is another structural issue, that dominant cultures get to have diversity in their stories, yet people from

minority and diverse backgrounds – one person is held up as representing all people.

Read more

Visit <http://sweatshop.ws/publications/> for information about *Sweatshop Women* and other Sweatshop publications.

Stories by Sweatshop members also appear in SBS Life: <https://www.sbs.com.au/topics/life?cid=infocus> and in various literary journals.

Michael Mohammed Ahmad is the founder and director of Sweatshop: Western Sydney Literacy Movement. He is an Arab-Australian author, editor and community arts worker from Bankstown whose first novel, *The Tribe* (Giramondo, 2014), won the 2015 *Sydney Morning Herald* Best Young Novelists of the Year Award. His follow-up novel, *The Lebs* (Hachette, 2018), received the

2019 NSW Premier's Multicultural Literary Award and has been shortlisted for the 2019 Miles Franklin Award. Mohammed received his Doctorate of Creative Arts from Western Sydney University in 2017.

Winnie Dunn is a Tongan-Australian writer and arts worker from Mt Druitt. She is the general manager of Sweatshop: Western Sydney Literacy Movement and holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from Western Sydney University. Winnie has edited several anthologies, including *Sweatshop Women*, *The Big Black Thing* and *Bent Not Broken*. Her work has been published in journals including *The Lifted Brow*, *Meanjin* and *Southerly*. She is currently completing her first novel as the recipient of a 2019 CAL Ignite Grant.

Mohammed and Winnie were interviewed by Deryn Mansell, *Fine Print* editor.

What's out there

***Sweatshop Women Volume One* – Edited by Winnie Dunn**

Reviewed by Sarah Deasy

This is a collection of prose and poetry by women of Aboriginal, migrant and refugee backgrounds. The collection is an initiative of Sweatshop: Western Sydney Literacy Movement.

Sweatshop initiatives result in publications, films, podcasts, plays, performance readings, exhibitions, and arts and cultural seminars which aim to create new and alternative forms of representation for marginalised communities throughout Western Sydney, and similar communities throughout Australia (<http://sweatshop.ws/movement/>)

Sweatshop Women is not a collection of individually generated pieces gathered over time. Rather, the authors came together as a collective each month in 2018, participating in workshops to develop their writing, and receiving support from more established women writers of colour such as Michelle Law and Randa Abdel-Fattah.

Twenty-seven women contributed to this collection, either as writers or working in the production and editing team. The writers represented are of Aboriginal, Arab, Asian, South American and Pasifika backgrounds.

As the writing seeks to speak about identity, geographical places of origin figure in many of the pieces, in return trips, photographs and memory. However, the suburbs of Western Sydney form an equally strong backdrop.

Western Sydney is one of the most diverse areas of Australia. In the 2016 Census, 41,868 of its population identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (ATSI), accounting for 19% of ATSI residents for the whole of New South Wales, and in several council areas more than half of the population speak a language other than English at home¹.

It's the roads, malls, takeaway shops, schools, parks and railway stations of Hurstville, Padstow, Rooty Hill, Merrylands, Lidcombe, Bankstown and Blacktown (to



name a few) that convey a sense of place and a proud identity. It's an area that hitherto is not reflected in a lot of Australian literature.

Across the 22 short pieces of poetry and prose, some common themes and experiences emerge. Casual racism confronts women as they attempt to find a job or to secure a high school place for a child, or simply to have their name pronounced correctly.

In 'Giving Dawah', by Ferdous Bahar, a young woman is questioned about her hijab and her prayer routine when she interviews for a job at a legal firm. The narrative takes place over the course of the interview in the form of an interior monologue, interspersed with questions from the interviewer who eventually loses interest and ends things in an abrupt manner. A few days later, she is told over the phone that she has not been successful. It's a powerful story, as the narrator begins with fresh hope and enthusiasm before descending into anxiety and disbelief in the face of these unexpected questions and the final grief upon hearing the outcome.

Aisha El-Cheikh's story 'This Ain't Bankstown' depicts a common experience for parents, which ends badly. A mother attends a high school open night in the more affluent suburb of Picnic Point. As she queues up she holds the same initial hope as we see with the job candidate in Ferdous's story, this time for a son to attend a 'good' school. Her hope soon gives way to a dawning awareness of hostility, first when it seems that she is invisible to the kids handing out prospectus portfolios, and then when no one will sit in the empty seats on either side of her, despite the fact that people are standing at the back of the hall.

So it is just me. It is just about my hijab. I turn around and face straight with my skin pricking. Whatever. I can't wait to head back to Bankstown.

Schools appear again in Joy Adan's story 'Good Filo'. Jericha's mother wants her to move to a Catholic school, where she believes there will be better discipline. Adan describes the mother's shame when her small daughter corrects Sister Agnes, who has mispronounced her name as 'Erica'. The story ends with a narrative twist as they visit the Filipino grocery shop on the way home, and a respected auntie (Tita) who serves them also gets her name wrong. 'Sister Agnes was one thing, but Ma would kill me if I spoke back to a tita.'

As with most of the pieces in the collection this story is enriched with first language vocabulary, the meanings of which can mostly be deduced from the context or a quick search. Other common threads emerge through the collection: sensory images of foods being prepared, cooked and shared, and the interactions between siblings, parents, grandparents and children, which in turns can be angry, sad, loving and subtle.

In 'Bad Thai Daughter' by Diane Wanasawek, there are four short pieces. In each one, a daughter observes her parents' different lives. The daughter can't slice the chicken 'as thin as onion skin' like her father who works long hours in their family restaurant: 'I still cook uneven chicken twenty-five years later like *pharung*, meaning, bad Thai daughter'

She remembers visits to Thailand and her dislike of the squat toilets. In Sydney, her parents return at midnight

after a long day in their Bankstown restaurant, still working, washing tablecloths and loading supplies into their van for the next day, before a meal and rest.

In 'A Curse and a Prayer' by Naima Ibrahim, a mother literally wrings her hands over her son, Hamid, when he comes home with an earring. The story takes place in Merrylands, Sydney, but pictures on the wall display her hometown of Buloburde in Somalia, 'where every adult was another pair of eyes for parents'. Despite her pleading and yelling, Hamid remains calm, holds her hand, and slowly and affectionately disengages before retiring to his room to play rap music and keep his earring.

Halfway through the book the reader is treated to 'Women of Colour in Black and White': 22 full pages of black and white portrait photographs of the writers, by Bethany Pal and Elaine Lim. The portraits are a rich complement to the texts.

As a collection of writing coupled with the photographs, the book makes a strong statement about under-represented communities. Each individual piece gives voice to a unique cultural experience, and also to the common one of living in Western Sydney.

And this is only Volume One. We look forward to hearing more from *Sweatshop Women*.

'We must use our own stories to create radical equity and justice' – Winnie Dunn (*Sweatshop Women Volume One p.XIV*)

Sweatshop Women Volume One is published by Sweatshop: Western Sydney Literacy Movement <http://sweatshop.ws/highlights/sweatshop-women-volume-one/>

An interview with Winnie Dunn, Editor of *Sweatshop Women: Volume One*, and Dr Michael Mohammed Ahmad, Founder and Director of *Sweatshop*, appears on pp. 33–6 in this issue of *Fine Print*.

Notes

- 1 Data from ABS: ATSI Population 2016 Census Data Summary and The Centre for Western Sydney: Community Profile <https://profile.id.com.au/cws/population>; <https://profile.id.com.au/cws/language>

***Numeracy: Teaching maths in context* by Dave Tout**

Reviewed by Andrew Kelly

The title of this book neatly sums up the relationship between numeracy and mathematics, and describes the practical approach the author takes to teaching numeracy in a variety of educational institutions.

This book is written for thoughtful practicing teachers. It is neither a collection of photocopiable single page exercises, nor an academic review of current ideas in the areas of numeracy and mathematics education. Rather, it is an extensive guide to designing teaching programs in individual contexts. The first chapter provides a well-researched, clear background for the need for different approaches to numeracy teaching, where institutions should teach numeracy in context with applied learning. This introduction makes a strong case for local design of curriculum by teachers and students together, rather than traditional approaches using external texts and resources. There is an extensive list of references for the introduction, which could be useful as jumping off points for further reading. The list does demonstrate the substantial academic background of the author.

The author's practical background is more apparent in the remainder of the book. There is a general guide to designing teaching programs, which is very detailed and useful. A beginning teacher, or any teacher seeking new ideas as to how to set out and plan a program, would be well served by this guide. Not surprisingly, a key notion is negotiation of the program, and the case is clearly made that this approach is worthwhile – although perhaps initially more demanding than just using an off-the-shelf resource, such negotiated programs lead to much stronger engagement and more meaningful outcomes.

The remaining five chapters are detailed explorations of possible topics: meaning from mathematics (broadly, statistics), driving, aspects of algebra, cooking, and sports. Each chapter has an introduction, a guide to the mathematical areas covered, and examples of activities – see overleaf for a sample activity from the 'cooking' chapter. Any of these chapters could be the basis of an extensive unit, but they are not written as ready to use units, which would go against the clearly expressed philosophy of the author.

The activities included are thorough and appear to have their origins in actual classroom teaching. They would



generally suit use in a classroom after some examination and alteration. The activities as presented are often quite wordy, with small or few photos, and substantial blocks of text. All of these activities are provided as editable MS Word documents from the publisher's website. Providing these resources in this way is excellent. There is of course, a huge amount of resource material for all kinds of teaching on the internet, but the process of scanning, retyping, reformatting and so on can be so cumbersome that teachers avoid the critical aspect of tailoring such resources.

This book is a valuable guide to preparing units of work for VET and VCAL classes, and a copy would be very useful for any teacher beginning this process. It will certainly be used in this reviewer's own practice. There are many further resources listed in the text, both from the author's own extensive catalogue, and from other publishers. Many relevant websites are listed. Some of the author's own resources may be worth further examination – they appear to be further examples of units and topics from the author's own teaching experience.

As a current VCAL teacher, I will certainly be using this text both for inspiration and for practical examples. I would recommend it to new VET/VCAL teachers, and to teachers seeking clarity as to preparation of teaching strategies.

Numeracy: Teaching maths in context (2017) is published by Multifangled: <http://multifangled.com.au/wp/> (ISBN: 9780987328427)

Andrew Kelly is a science and mathematics teacher with experience teaching numeracy to VCAL students in a state secondary school.

A sample activity from *Numeracy: Teaching maths in context* is reproduced below with permission from multifangled.com.au. See our review of this resource on p.39.

End-of-year meal

| Investigation: | |
|---|---|
| <p>The class is to cater and cook a meal for the whole group for the end of the year lunch. Students are to work in small groups to prepare and cater for the meal, including drinks, at least three different types of food and some sweets or desserts. Once negotiated and agreed on what food is to be cooked, the students work out a timeline against tasks required to hold the function. Each group writes a shopping list for all the ingredients they need and cost the ingredients. The total cost is then calculated and students share the costs. Using the money paid into the kitty, the ingredients are purchased and the meal is prepared and cooked and the event undertaken. Each group writes a report on the food including any recipes and calculations they needed to undertake to purchase and make their part of the meal.</p> | |
| Steps | Possible mathematics skills |
| Decide on food for the meal | <p>Number:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use place value concepts for whole numbers and decimals to interpret and compare written numbers and metric measures • understand and estimate with common fractions and their use in practical contexts <p>Measurement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identify common notations for metric measurement • demonstrate a sense of common and standard metric units |
| Establish ingredients required | <p>Number:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use place value concepts for whole numbers and decimals to interpret and compare written numbers and metric measures • calculate and estimate with decimals and common fractions and their use in practical contexts <p>Measurement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identify common notations for metric measurement • demonstrate a sense of common and standard metric units • calculate accurately and efficiently with decimals and fractions of metric measures |
| Cost of meal | <p>Number:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use place value concepts for whole numbers and decimals to interpret and compare written numbers and metric measures • calculate and estimate with decimals and common fractions and their use in practical contexts • use number facts and rounding to give rough estimates of numerical calculations |
| Work out timeline and tasks | <p>Measurement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use and calculate with time. |
| Purchase ingredients | <p>Number:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • understand, calculate and estimate with money, decimals and common fractions and their use in practical contexts <p>Measurement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • estimate and interpret mass and volume measurements |



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