

Australia's Greatest Challenge—The Link Between Indigenous Health and Education

The Arch Nelson Memorial Address to the Australian Council for Adult Literacy, Adelaide, 6 October 2006, delivered by Jeff McMullen, Honorary CEO, Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth Trust

Wandering the world for over fifty years, writing, listening and learning about the human family, has deepened my appreciation of Australia's Indigenous people. I am not romanticising the past but it is essential to acknowledge the strength and value of the world's oldest continuous culture before we can even begin to understand the scale of the health and education emergency afflicting so many of Australia's 460 000 Indigenous citizens.

The truth is, the Children of the First Sunrise, are usually thought of last. The timelines of our history rarely give adequate acknowledgement of the extraordinary journey Indigenous people have been on for longer than any of us really knows.

If we began our education as children by learning about the land itself, the wonders of Gondwana long before humans evolved, perhaps then we would have more humility about our place in the great scheme of things. I was once camped on the blue ice of Antarctica in a section of the Ellsworth Mountains empty of other life and, thinking of the drift of the continents, the fascinating journey this Great South Land has been on, I never felt more connected to all living things, to the delight of each delicious breath of air and the feeling that every day is a precious opportunity. No matter how fearful some of us have become, we are all part of an extraordinary human family, bound by destiny and DNA. I believe the more you wander and the more you explore the whole world of ideas the more appropriate scale you can develop for acknowledging the achievement of people who have survived and adapted here through periods of great change, and yet they are here, with so much knowledge intact. Make no mistake. Learning is not a 'white thing'. It empowers every human being. And so we must ask, what can we learn from the Children of the First Sunrise, the descendants of the world's oldest continuous culture?

To develop a genuine sense of place as Australians, with an accurate and authentic understanding of history, Indigenous studies must have a central place in Australian education. This is a first step to close the space between

us and to end this silent apartheid which holds us back from true greatness as a nation.

A few years ago my daughter, Claire, now 12, asked me to sit as she read me a passage from Anita Heiss's book, *The Diary of Mary Talence : Sydney 1937*. In this story, a little Aboriginal girl named Mary asks her white teacher, 'How can Captain Cook have discovered Australia when my people were already here?'

My daughter's eyes were gleaming as she read me that passage. She understood Mary. Stories like this leap from the page into our lives. It was a moment of genuine learning as father and daughter shared a conversation about how school and education in general become alien when the stories make no sense to the student, when the history taught has a time-line that the child knows is a lie, when the books ignore colour, context, culture and even the sense of place, the land as Aboriginal people know it.

For many Aboriginal children their view of school has not changed a great deal since the era of the Stolen Generation in which the fictional Mary Talence lived. Education, many will tell you, is 'a white thing'. School is a 'Gubba' place created by those 'white ghosts' who floated into their lives two centuries ago. School is an institution from which

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their grandparents were taken away. Yes it might as well be behind a high barbed wire fence because it is not an integral part of their communities. It does not reflect their contemporary lives and it often reduces their history, a vast compelling history of the land and human settlement, to a strangely distorted and disorienting adjunct to the history of European conquest. Through Aboriginal eyes, we never seem to begin the story at the beginning or to give them much reason to have pride in who they are as people. As time goes on at school this difference in perception is magnified into a state of separation. This is one of the most important underlying reasons for the continuing disinterest and high rates of illiteracy among Aboriginal children.

The separation is not confined to schools and it is not always the fault of some hard-working principals, teachers and university lecturers who often give their all trying to share a love of learning.

Indigenous people still spend much of their lives contending with racism that reduces their opportunities, denies their rights and erases their point of view. The decades old structure of welfare dependency guarantees that many Indigenous people will look on the 'white system' with deep suspicion because it plainly does not deliver them equality in any sense. This is institutionalised racism.

It should not be a surprise, then, that so many Indigenous children are suspicious of the dominant white system. When you look at the scale of the historical and continuing inequity it should not be a surprise that so many have education levels so low that they will be trapped in a lifetime of disadvantage. Collectively we have lowered their expectations. They look at their parents and aunts and uncles and see little hope that school will change anyone's luck.

There are very revealing similarities in the way various cultural groups around the world experiencing such disadvantage struggle to connect with an educational system shaped and dominated by the cultures in power. In many of these nations other disadvantaged minorities also conclude that education is a 'white thing'. I have witnessed this pattern (and tried to learn from it) in my travels over four decades through the Amazon, Central America and much of North America. Only among the Saami in Norway, Finland and Sweden has the equitable investment in health and education lifted Indigenous people to genuine equality.

When the former US Surgeon General, David Satcher visited Central Australia a couple of years back he was pressed by reporters for a solution to the crisis that sees Indigenous people dying 17 to 20 years before the rest of Australians. Satcher's answer? Education. Life-skills education. Native Americans still lag far behind white Americans in most forms of standard educational testing. But Satcher argued that education had been an essential factor in empowering communities to regain some control over their destiny and this included improving health.

When I first filmed for the ABC's *Four Corners* in the Native American lands in the early 1970s the Native Americans' life expectancy lagged between 12 and 16 years behind white Americans. Today the gap is 3.5 to 5 years behind white Americans. You see Australia's Indigenous children are by any measure the most disadvantaged of any in a

developed nation. We have simply not been willing to learn enough from those who are closing some of these gaps. The gap between Australia's blacks and whites in learning and in life expectancy is connected. Closing these gaps is the major civil rights challenge of our time. It is Australia's one genuine emergency staring our generation in the face and yet we act with so little urgency.

There is in the heartland of our country a terrible plague of chronic illness. 'Syndrome X', the doctors call it. It's diabetes, end-state renal failure, hypertension, strokes and heart disease. It's literally a new 'Black Death' scything through two generations of Aboriginal people. At 58, usually I am the oldest man walking the streets in the communities I work with. Equally confronting is the fact that the racial gap in life expectancy eerily parallels the racial gap in education. It is not an accident that in this zone of distress with a life expectancy of just 46 for Aboriginal men in the Northern Territory, you find illiteracy rates as high as 93 per cent.

So why are these disaster zones of health also education disaster zones? The answer lies in the complex chain of factors that produce disadvantage beginning at birth and developing into a loss of control over individual lives and even the destiny of whole communities. In the case of some children the disadvantage starts in utero. American scholar, Paul E. Barton, found that of fourteen major factors contributing to the racial gap in educational achievement, eight of them occurred before the child reached school. Of great interest to me was Barton's finding that hunger, nutrition and dangerously low birth weight were important contributors. He is not alone in these findings.

Syndrome X, that cluster of illnesses devastating Aboriginal lives, was for a long time explained by some as the consequence of a weak gene. I heard the same racial excuse used thirty years ago to explain the disproportionate amount of these illnesses among Native Americans and Afro-Americans. But this theory has been shattered in recent years. Monash University, the Menzies School of Health Research in the NT and the University of Mississippi examined autopsies and found a fascinating constant among those who had died of these Syndrome X illnesses. It crossed over race but hovered around hunger and poverty. The common factor was being born a dangerously low birth weight baby.

A leading Aboriginal scholar, Professor Ted Wilkes, and Dr Fiona Stanley of the Telethon Institute, report in their landmark assessment of Aboriginal health in Western Australia, a disturbing pattern of hunger, poor nutrition and a high incidence of smoking and drinking while young Aboriginal mothers were pregnant. These are among the major causes of those dangerously low birth weight babies.

We need to make a far more vigorous and creative effort, with messages shaped by Indigenous people, to help especially young teenage mothers understand that it is not only their health that is threatened. It is the future of their child, including the child's intellect and ability to learn.

Every Australian literacy study confirms that by Year 3 many Indigenous children have fallen 18 months behind the national literacy and numeracy standards. The strugglers continue to deteriorate and by Year 7 lag five

years behind. In the Northern Territory in those remote communities I work closely with the failure is still more glaring. In 2004 just 60 Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory's government schools completed high school. In many remote communities school attendance is around fifty per cent and in some as low as 20 per cent of enrolments. The new teachers last on average about seven months and then give up, reinforcing the cycle of failure. Children drift away from school and are trapped in a life of limited opportunities. How will these Australian children make their way through modern life with the literacy level of a six-year-old?

If they can't read or write properly how will they ever find their way out of the maze of poverty, poor health and welfare dependency? How will they get a driver's licence to move with freedom in the wider world or ever hold down a well paying job? Almost certainly non-readers will become dependent on others for simple but sometimes critical functions like understanding the dosage on a medicine bottle, even when you need it for survival. As well, only children who have been educated to understand their rights, the right to safety and the sanctity of their bodies, the choice of what is good or damaging to their lives, only children with such life-empowering knowledge have a reasonable chance of health and happiness in today's world.

One of the Jawoyn elders I worked with on these issues in the remote communities of south east Arnhem Land lamented that his people so often had to depend on outsiders, even to write the words for them as they desperately pleaded for help. It was this tireless and determined fighter for the Jawoyn people, the late Bangardi Lee, who urged Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth Trust to lend a hand on literacy in the dozen remote communities east of Katherine. When we buried this fine leader at Barunga late last year I watched a sea of children, many barefooted, but already they had the white shirts and the black pants, the uniforms that they will wear to funeral after funeral, in an endless procession of death and grieving. My whispered promise as we pressed our sweat onto the coffin before it was lowered into the ground was that I would do as he asked and do what we can to help improve the kind of learning that can mean life.

Doctors have told me that for every extra year of education you can provide to a community of young mothers we may add up to four years to the life expectancy of their first child. Ken Wyatt, the head of Aboriginal Health in NSW adds that increasing the education of that mother by a single year can also reduce the danger of infant mortality when she gives birth by between 7 and 10 per cent. This is what I think of when I say, 'Literacy can mean life'.

As the honorary CEO of Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth Trust, for the past five years I have been working closely with some of Australia's brightest Indigenous educators,

people who believe that education is the best way for others to find their way out of the maze of poverty and bad health. The challenge, as every good teacher knows, is to get onto the right wavelength for every child.

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whole communities. You must believe that all of these children and young people can learn.

Noel Pearson and Marcia Langton are inspiring so many young people to believe and to venture out from their communities to seek higher education. In this way they will claim their fair place in Australian life but always be able to return at will to the sustaining strengths of Indigenous culture. This takes courage but in time it brings the freedom to move anywhere in the world of ideas while always knowing who you are and where you come from.

Waverly Stanley, another Aboriginal educator from Murgon in Queensland, has created the Yalari Scholarship Project to reward suitable Aboriginal students with the opportunity to study in good secondary schools that can support them and increase their chances of success. And at Sydney University recently I spoke to forty Aboriginal students visiting from St Joseph's Hunter Hill where most of them were making good progress on scholarships through high-school.

This affirmative action in education is important and creates the pathway to higher achievement. These bright lights have given us a glimpse of the future possible for more and more Aboriginal people through education. This is the obvious place to start is with young mothers and their children. Several Nobel Laureates have told us that and pointed out the cost benefits. But in most Aboriginal communities there is little maternal health education and we are only just beginning to make a greater effort to see that children start school better prepared for this kind of learning.

A new project that we are working on in the Jawoyn communities, east of Katherine, in the Northern Territory, aims to build up early learning among the young mothers and their children. Working with a committed team at the Sunrise Health Service Aboriginal Corporation we are also entering our fourth year of supporting a child health education project that goes out into the schools and teaches the children about nutrition, health and hygiene. Sunrise gives a lot of attention to the young mothers.

With the personal encouragement of Dr Brendan Nelson whose AMA background clearly let him understand the connection between education and health, we then gained ►

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Federal education support for this literacy empowerment project. Working with teachers and principals of the NT schools we have been able to show that it is possible to build cooperation between all the vital partners needed to improve Indigenous education. Working with parents, teachers and principals, we have introduced in four communities, what we call Literacy Backpacks. I first saw this approach in the Navajo communities of North America over twenty years ago and it has also been tried in a few Catholic schools in the Kimberley. Parents, teachers and students come together to fill the Literacy Backpacks with suitable reading not just for the children but for the adults at home. We arrange regular subscriptions to the *Indigenous Times* and *Koori Mail* newspapers and include women's magazines and sporting journals.

I was in the Jawoyn communities of Wugularr and Manyallaluk in August and September as the Aboriginal teachers rewarded the kids who are making good progress with book vouchers that allow them to choose any book from the Katherine Bookshop. That lady drives hundreds of kilometres to spread out the books for these kids and let them have that exciting moment of finding something they really want to read. We also subscribe to the Scholastic Book Club to let the children choose a book each term. To introduce the idea of responsibility for the books in communities that have never had a public library, the NT Library Association has helped train some assistant teachers to bar code some of the books that can be rotated through the Literacy Backpacks in a very simple lending scheme. When children see their parents reading too the pattern of disadvantage has begun to change. Over the last few years I have seen books taken home to once bookless homes. If you find yourself in the book, education is not a 'white thing'. In time we will see far more Aboriginal writers follow storytellers like Albert Holt and Ernie Grant paint their world with words, just as they do in music, dance and film: all contemporary expressions of Aboriginal literacy.

In Wugularr, we are now working with the Aboriginal actor and musician, Tom Lewis, to refurbish an old building that will soon become an Arts and Cultural Centre, because this kind of education is also vitally important to build up

the health of a community. People must understand who they are and be proud. Each year this community stages its Walking with Spirits Festival near a waterfall, under a moonlit sky, and the children contribute music, dance, sometimes puppetry and even animated short films, created by those committed to the many kinds of learning that make a community robust and give it an identity of its own.

I believe strongly that some of the greatest success stories in Australian Indigenous education, schools I have visited like Kuranda and Yarrabah outside Cairns, have managed to improve their literacy rates partly by forging much stronger links between the school and the whole community. This is why the Literacy Backpacks are a wonderful concept. You've got to get the family involved. Well that's how we get it done in my household.

My daughter, Claire, and son, Will, once organised the right kind of books for an Aboriginal teacher, Lorraine Bennett, who used those resources to start the first pre-school in Wugularr. My children didn't just talk about the problem. They took action, writing letters, organising their schools to conduct sleep-outs and other fundraisers, finding their own words to suggest that we can all lend a hand to the Children of the First Sunrise. This simple, direct action led to publishers getting involved and then the Australian Reader's Challenge being launched around the country by Brisbane bookseller, Suzy Wilson of Riverbend Books, in conjunction with Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth Trust, the Fred Hollows Foundation and the Australian Booksellers Association.

I believe that if we support the efforts of Aboriginal parents to see that their children become strong and smart we can change this disastrous situation. This year about 10 000 Indigenous children will be born and our challenge is to see that they grow up in families with the same support, the same opportunity for a long and healthy life as all other Australian children. It's time for us all to make this personal and do what we can to see that all of Australia's children find their rightful place in this nation's story. There is no better way to close this space between us.

There can be no question of turning away. These are our children. ■

Ian Thorpe's
Fountain for
Youth Trust,
PO Box 402
Manly,
NSW 1655,
02-89669422
www.ianthorpes
fountainforyouth.
com.au

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James Plumridge is an adult literacy consultant representing Western Australia on the ACAL Executive. He worked for several years with Noongar communities in the Great Southern region of WA and more recently at an indigenous TAFE campus in the Pilbara. Dr Plumridge has degrees in education, including a PhD, and a Master's in Applied Linguistics. A longer, academic version of this article is available from www.acal.edu.au

Some readers may wonder what the topic of this article has to do with adult literacy teaching. Many of us have had adult Aboriginal students and been struck by cultural and language differences that influence how they learn, particularly those differences that touch on how they deal with questioning in the classroom. Further, as teachers we occupy, relative to our students, positions of authority and power. This should encourage us to think about how language is used to differentiate those who wield power from those who lack it and to confirm the right of the first group to wield the power they have. All institutional power springs from the same source, and every expression of such power through language bears a family resemblance, however faint, to every other.

This article examines excerpts from transcripts of three encounters between Aboriginal people and the criminal justice system in the Pilbara. The first is from a police interview of a suspect, the second from direct examination by a police prosecutor of a prosecution witness, and the third from cross-examination of an accused young person by a police prosecutor. The main focus of the article is on miscommunication resulting from questioning strategies. The names of police officers have been omitted, and those of Aboriginal people changed. These encounters took place a few years ago, but it would not be surprising to discover that similar episodes still occur today.

Aboriginal people and criminal justice in Western Australia

In the 2001 Census, people identifying as indigenous accounted for roughly 3.5% of the estimated resident Western Australian population. They figure much more prominently in the state criminal justice system, both as accused persons and, especially women, as victims of crime. In WA, Aboriginal people are almost ten times more likely to be arrested by police than non-Aboriginal people, and nineteen times more likely to be arrested for offences involving violence. In 2000, a quarter of all police arrests were of Aboriginal people. WA has the highest rate of indigenous imprisonment in Australia.

The massive over-representation of Aboriginal people at the receiving end of WA's criminal justice system has no simple explanation. The effects of colonisation, oppression, cultural dislocation, victimisation, unemployment and lack of education doubtless play a significant part. So, too, does the way that offences against public order, such as disorderly conduct, are dealt with in the Criminal Code. Once Aboriginal people are embroiled with the system, cultural and language differences have a powerful bearing on their fate.

Aboriginal people, language and the law

Police interviews and court appearances are rarely pleasant for anyone. They present special difficulties for Aboriginal people. Those difficulties arise from the language as well as from the structure and organisation of the justice system. This is so even when Aboriginal people speak English or Aboriginal English. Traditional ways of thinking, feeling and behaving may survive even when the languages once used to codify and express them have been lost. We should beware of assuming that because many Aboriginal people sound more or less like the rest of us, they think and feel in the same ways.

The whitefella justice system is essentially adversarial. The main idea behind it is that truth will emerge from the clash of opposing evidence and arguments. In practice, what often takes place in a courtroom is a contest heavily weighted in favour of a stronger party and directed on both sides towards victory rather than truth. Court procedures are rigid and ritualized, as is much of the language used to control what happens in the courtroom. Lawyers and police prosecutors often prevent witnesses from saying what *they* want to say and most of the talking is actually done by judges and other representatives of the system. Aboriginal people, being used to indirect forms of questioning, may experience direct questioning as aggressive and confronting. Perhaps the most intrusive questions for Aboriginal people are 'why' questions that seek a motive or reason. The most confusing are 'either-or' questions, to which an Aboriginal person may for the sake of politeness respond yes or no without distinguishing between the options presented.

Under pressure of persistent or relentless direct questioning, Aboriginal people may resort to 'gratuitous concurrence'—simply agreeing with the questioner—as a way of deflecting hostility or avoiding confrontation. They may also experience 'shame' in circumstances, like being in the witness box, which single them out for public attention. They find it hard to relate to the whitefella distrust of silence (for many Aboriginal people, silence is acceptable and causes no discomfort) and are used to conversations in which the listener, not the speaker, is in charge. Interruptions—a prominent feature of courtroom discourse—may be felt as rude and distressing.

CASE 1: Kevin Smith – Police interview (official transcript of videotape)

Kevin Smith is a traditional Aboriginal man from a Pilbara desert community. In 2001 he was arrested and charged with having committed several violent offences against ▶

Three encounters between Aboriginal people and the criminal justice system in the Pilbara, Western Australia

his partner, Melissa. He was taken to a police station and interviewed by a detective-sergeant in the presence of another officer.

At the time of this interview, Kevin was in his mid-thirties. He has a long history of offending and has spent time in gaol. Presumably, then, he has had considerable experience of police interviews.

When police interview a criminal suspect, their ultimate aim is to obtain a confession. To be admissible as evidence in court, this must be obtained fairly and without undue pressure. The interviewer in this case is therefore anxious to show that Kevin is being treated with every consideration. He asks Kevin to confirm (which he does) that he was invited to contact the Aboriginal Legal Service and said no, and also that he has been given a can of Coke, a glass of water and a Panadol and is sober and not under the influence of any drug.

The key procedural element in a police interview is the caution. This is a standardized form of words meant to ensure that anything a suspect says may be presented as evidence in court. If the caution is not properly administered, defence counsel is likely to challenge confessional material obtained at the time of arrest or during an interview and may succeed in having it thrown out.

The caution is not really framed as a warning. However, if suspects do not understand that speaking to the police may have bad consequences for them, they cannot be said to have understood the caution. The phrase 'You do not have to say anything' which is central to the caution may sound odd to an Aboriginal suspect, for whom not having to answer a question may well be a cultural norm.

The following exchange suggests that Kevin knows about the caution but does not really understand it, even though he must have heard it many times before.

- Q. Okay. I've cautioned you, but I'll go through it again and then I want you to explain it to me in your own words. I'll caution you by saying you are not obliged to say anything unless you wish to do so and you do not have to participate in this record of interview unless you wish to do so, but whatever you say or do is going to be recorded on a videotape and may be given in evidence. Do you understand that?
- A. Yeah, I know -
- Q. All right. I want you to explain it to me, what that means.
- A. Oh well, you ask me a question and I give you the evidence of what I did or -
- Q. The answer. You'll give me the answer. All right?
- A. All right.
- Q. Now do you understand what - do you understand that you don't have to say anything to me?
- A. Nuh.
- Q. Do you understand that?
- A. Yeah.
- Q. Yeah? That if at any stage you say 'No comment' then that's it. Do you understand all that?
- A. Yeah.
- Q. All right.
- A. No comment ...(indistinct)...

- Q. Yeah, yeah. So you understand all that?
- A. Yes.
- Q. All right. Do you know what evidence is?
- A. Yeah, I know what evidence is.
- Q. Can you tell me what evidence is?
- A. You know -
- Q. You tell me what - what - what is what - what is evidence?
- A. Dunno. You tell me.
- Q. All right. Evidence is, for example, there's been a fight and a knife has been used, all right? Evidence can be the knife, it can be blood if there's blood, it can be the cut, it can be the doctor's report, it can be all those sorts of things. That's called evidence. Do you understand that?
- A. (No audible response).

The interviewer's attempt to get Kevin to show that he understands the caution goes badly off the rails, because he is in a hurry to get the answers he wants and cannot tolerate silence or delay. He interrupts Kevin three times. His worst moment comes when he tries to get Kevin to explain the meaning of 'evidence', and failing in that, explains it to him in terms that have nothing to do with either the wording of the caution or Kevin's alleged wrongdoing. The interviewer's technique throughout the interview is self-defeating, on two counts. First, it is not in a police officer's interest to interrupt or silence a suspect at interview; the more suspects are permitted to say, the better chance there is of obtaining confessional material. Secondly, there is little doubt that if Kevin's case goes to court, confessional material obtained during the interview will be challenged and ruled inadmissible because he may not have understood the caution.

Since Kevin is not allowed to respond to the interviewer's questions in his own way, it is difficult to interpret from the transcript what he might have been thinking and feeling during this exchange. He may well have decided at the outset to cooperate fully with the interviewer. In that case, he must have found the interviewer's approach bewildering. His 'verbal shrug' - 'Dunno. You tell me' - and his failure to respond audibly to the interviewer's 'explanation' of the caution are perhaps the best clues to his state of mind.

CASE 2: Rose Watkins – Examination-in-chief (official transcript of court proceedings)

Rose Watkins is a traditional woman from a remote Aboriginal community. Her first language is not English but Martuwangka. In the following excerpt from a committal hearing, Rose is giving evidence for the prosecution against a young Aboriginal man whom she alleges tried to sexually assault her in the cubicle of a women's toilet.

- Q. Just go back to when you were coming across the oval before you got to the toilet cubicle, you say that he [the accused] - was - he was following you?
- A. Yeah, we had a talk early part; we had a talk early part. All he had was his knife and, what do you call it, fork and a...(indistinct)...scissors. And all he was talking about is having sex.
- Q. He was, was he?

- A. Yeah.
- Q. Was this when you were walking or was it back at the [pub]?
- A. Yeah.
- Q. What did you say to him when he said that?
- A. I walked off; I went home; I was walking home.
- Q. Is that the reason you walked off; you didn't want to hear what he was saying?
- A. I didn't want to talk to him.
- Q. You didn't want to talk to him. When you got near the toilets did you say anything to him that would make him think that you wanted him to come in there?
- A. He was talking about sex; that's all he ever - I don't know. He could have any womans in anywhere; he could have raped all these white girls too.
- Q. So he was talking about sex. What were you saying to him about that?
- A. I was laughing, I was laughing to him and I was - I thought he was joking.
- Q. All right. Thank you, Rose. That's the evidence of this witness, your worship.

In this case, the Aboriginal participant is under 'friendly fire.' The prosecutor is keen to establish a case against the accused and it is Rose, as alleged victim, whose evidence is critical to his purpose. He does not interrupt her and several times adopts the strategy of repeating her statements to confirm and reinforce them. Apart from one 'either-or' question (to which Rose answers 'Yeah'), and one syntactically complex question (about what she may have said to the accused near the toilets) which she doesn't answer directly, he says nothing that appears to confuse her. However, he has his own agenda – to 'get to the point' as quickly as possible – and this leads him to miss several opportunities to help Rose clarify and reinforce key aspects of her testimony. These are, first, that the accused was armed with a knife; secondly, that she did nothing to provoke or encourage the assault; and thirdly, that she walked away from the accused *because* he kept talking about sex (embarrassing for a traditional woman, as having to give this evidence must have been). He might also have helped her to clarify her reasons for not at first taking the accused's sexual approaches seriously. Without that clarification, her statement that 'he could have any womans in anywhere; he could have raped all these white girls too' seems no more than a bizarre distraction. The result of this piece of miscommunication was that the defence succeeded in depicting Rose's narrative as rambling, inconsequential and unreliable.

CASE 3: Megan Rover – Cross-examination (official transcript of court proceedings)

Megan lives in a Pilbara town. While still a teenager, she was charged with disorderly conduct (swearing in public) and assaulting a police officer. The charges arose from an incident outside a local hotel, when she was taken into custody after having been told by police to leave the hotel because she was under age. The police alleged that she told one of the arresting officers to 'get fucked' and subsequently kicked him while sitting in the back of the police car on the way to the station. She alleged that the officer had sworn at her first ('get in the fucking car'), and later struck her, causing a cut above her right eyebrow; she claims to have raised her legs in the car to ward off any further blows and may have kicked him by accident. The matter was heard in children's court. The magistrate convicted Megan on both charges.

The prosecuting sergeant's opening remarks—domineering, condescending, and long-winded—set the tone for his cross-examination as a whole.

- Q. Ms Rover, I'm going to ask you a lot of questions. If you don't know the answers to them don't try to guess the answer. All right. I just want the truth, so if you don't know don't try to think you have to please me. Now, you have a good recollection of what happened on this day. Would you say it's a very good recollection of what happened?
- A. Yeah.
- Q. You know that it's wrong for a policeman to punch someone that they've arrested?
- A. What was it?
- Q. It's wrong, isn't it? Policemen can't punch people once they've been arrested. That's wrong, isn't it? Can a policeman punch a person in the back of a police car?
- A. No.
- Q. No. It's wrong, isn't it? You know that. You get to the police station and you get taken out of the car?
- A. Mm hm.
- Q. You see a policeman who you must know fairly well. You've referred to him by his nickname...Did you tell him you had been punched? Now, he is a person of Aboriginal descent?
- A. Yes.
- Q. He's well-respected in this community?
- A. Yes.

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ACAL promotes co-operation among interested organisations and individuals, both government and non-government, by undertaking and encouraging appropriate study, research and action.

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EDITORIAL COMMITTEE

Margaret McHugh (Editor), Jim Plumridge, Yvonne Russell, Philip Baram (Commissioning Editor), Gabrielle Markus (Layout and Production).

Correspondence for ACAL including membership should be addressed to:

GPO Box 2283 Canberra ACT 2601

Telephone: (03) 9546 6892

Facsimile: (03) 9546 0421

Email: acal@pacific.net.au

Web: www.acal.edu.au

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The prosecutor then asks why, having been 'beaten up' by the arresting officers, Megan didn't speak to the Aboriginal officer. Megan replies that she doesn't speak to that officer but did ask to speak to an Aboriginal police aide, Albert, who as it turned out was off duty.

- Q. He wasn't there. You know Constable X [another Aboriginal police aide]?
- A. I didn't know he [Albert] had finished work at the time.
- Q. You know Constable X, don't you?
- A. I know him by his name.
- Q. He's a policeman who you've had no trouble with in the past?
- A. Yeah.
- Q. If you were in fear and you were scared you could have said something to him?
- A. But I didn't.
- Q. He had your friends with him at the time and you said nothing to them either?
- A. They're just members of the community. They're not my friends.
- Q. They are your friends. They are people that you know, aren't they?
- A. You could say that.

What comes across in this exchange is not only the prosecutor's insensitivity to local Aboriginal culture, but also his apparent ignorance or disregard of the vexed history of police/community relations in the region. The Aboriginal community of Megan's town is still fairly traditional. For kinship reasons, it may not have been possible for Megan to speak to Constable X or to approach the individuals described by the prosecutor as her 'friends'. The racism inherent in the prosecutor's contention that the people concerned must have been her friends because they were Aboriginal hardly needs pointing out.

In Roebourne, in 1983, a 16 year old Aboriginal man, John Pat, died in police custody after an altercation between police officers and a group of Aboriginal men outside the Victoria Hotel. That event, which eventually gave rise to a Royal Commission, is part of Pilbara folklore as well as of the history of black/white relations in Western Australia. Set against that background, aggressive questioning of a young Aboriginal woman about whether it is right or wrong for a policeman to act violently is not only irrelevant (the question is whether or not he did it, not whether she thinks it was wrong for him to do it) but also (even from a whitefella perspective) tasteless and intimidating.

The excerpts discussed here illustrate in different ways the scope for miscommunication between Aboriginal people and representatives of the justice system. As it happens, all three involve police officers as questioners, but it would surely not be difficult to find similar instances where the questioning was done by lawyers.

It would be unfair to say that police officers in the Pilbara or elsewhere are typically incompetent or insensitive in their dealings with Aboriginal people. Most officers do the best they can often in very difficult circumstances. There is good anecdotal evidence that police officers increasingly recognise and take account of cultural differences in their dealings with Aboriginal people, though it is not certain

how much *linguistic* training they get to assist them.

In recent years, attempts have been made to bring cultural and linguistic differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to the attention of the Western Australian judiciary. However, the WA Court of Criminal Appeal, in *Stack v Western Australia* (2004) has questioned a trial judge's direction to a Perth jury to take account of cultural and linguistic differences in evaluating the testimony of an Aboriginal witness. The appeal judges reasoned that Aboriginal people involved in the case, being 'suburban dwellers', were not significantly different, linguistically and culturally, from other suburban folk. This implies that Aboriginal people living in cities and sounding more or less like their non-Aboriginal neighbours have entirely lost their traditional ways of thinking, feeling and interacting with others. Whatever the merits of this particular case, it is a pity that lesser courts now have to accept that view as a rule of thumb.

What specific lessons can adult literacy teachers derive from the verbal exchanges analysed here? One is to avoid direct and persistent questioning of Aboriginal students and especially the use of 'either/or' questions. A second is not to demand, even politely, that a student should say or do something; 'maybe you'd like to' is even better than 'please'. Thirdly, interrupting or hassling for an answer is usually self-defeating. If a student doesn't respond immediately to something you've said that doesn't mean the student 'didn't get it'. Fourthly, it's best not to assume that the whitefella way of telling a story in strict logical or chronological order is intrinsically superior to the elaboration of a multi-layered narrative that leaps from topic to topic and weaves backwards and forwards in time. Finally, bear in mind that many Aboriginal students have to translate what you say into Aboriginal English, which is not identical to Standard Australian English even when it may appear to be (and is a very far cry from the 'hyperliterate' jargon that plagues our profession today). ■

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Community volunteering, a cross sectoral partnership, and integrated LLN

Dr Stephen Black and Marion Lucchinelli, Meadowbank TAFE College

Feature

In July 2005 the Adult Basic Education (ABE) section at Meadowbank TAFE College, a formal vocational education and training (VET) provider, received DEST Innovative Project Funding to conduct a cross-sectoral project with a local community agency, Christian Community Aid Service (CCAS), at Eastwood. Both organisations are key providers in their own sectors in the local community. The project aimed to place culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) people in volunteer work in the local Ryde/Eastwood area following training and support in volunteering and English language and literacy skills.

Four 10-week courses of training, support and volunteer placements were undertaken over the year July 2005 to June 2006. The ABE section at Meadowbank TAFE provided the English language and literacy support, while CCAS provided training in volunteering and most placements in volunteer work. The project was based on a multi-faceted rationale that included:

- the need for more volunteers in a range of areas but in particular aged and community care;
- the relatively small number of CALD people currently involved in volunteer work;
- the need for greater community participation by older people;
- the possibility of volunteer work operating as a stepping stone to paid work;
- the need for more partnerships and 'cross sectoral' approaches to community social issues; and
- at a broader level, the need to increase social cohesion in communities.

Research literature indicated the extensive social needs of older people and CALD people in the Ryde local government area and in particular the need for volunteer services in the aged and community care sectors (City of Ryde 2004a & b). Volunteer work provides benefits for individuals and communities, especially in developing social capital (Cox 1997). Adult education providers are seen to have a potential role in the training of volunteers (Coates 2005). This project appeared to fit well with current adult literacy policy promoting 'cross-sectoral' partnerships as a way of developing community capacity (ACAL 2004, Wickert & McGuirk 2005) and where adult literacy and numeracy provision has resulted in social capital outcomes (Balatti *et al* 2006). Similarly the broader VET field includes a focus on developing inclusive and sustainable communities (ANTA 2004). Social partnerships between community agencies and VET providers are also encouraged (Billett *et al* 2005, Guenther *et al* forthcoming).

The project employed an action research model involving continuous reflection and intervention during the four courses. Quantitative and qualitative research data were collected, though with a particular emphasis on the latter through semi-structured interviews with the main participants. Most participants (82 per cent) were females aged from 34 to 76 years with an average age of 51 years.



Nationalities varied but largely reflected the main CALD groups in the Ryde area (i.e., 40 per cent were of Chinese background, 17 per cent were Korean, and 11 per cent were Afghani). Participants, assessed for their language/literacy levels according to the National Reporting System (NRS), were found to be predominantly in the lowest two levels (27 per cent at Level 1, 53 per cent at Level 2).

For each 10-week course participants began by attending a three hours a week language and literacy class at TAFE designed to develop skills and orient participants towards voluntary work. The focus was on practical activities, role playing, sharing ideas and working on the language of employment. This was followed by their volunteer job placements. CCAS specific volunteer training was a day orientation workshop focusing on the nature of volunteering and issues such as confidentiality, values and attitudes, grief and loss, and volunteer safety.

Of the 47 participants enrolled in the program, 37 worked as volunteers. Several withdrew for varied reasons such as full time work or being too busy (some had grandparents' duties). Forty-six per cent worked for the local meals-on- ▶

This paper briefly explains how the project proceeded. Hard copies of the report are available at no cost by contacting: stephen.black@tafensw.edu.au The report is also available online on DEST's LiteracyNet site at <http://www.dest.gov.au/literacynet/>

wheels program, next was the luncheon groups where aged people are transported to and from community locations for an organised lunch, then there was volunteer visitors to people's homes, and finally, child care. Other volunteers included: medical driver; gardening; bus outing helper; conducting an art class; conducting Tai Chi classes; helping with maths tuition in a public school; and training for financial counselling. Some participants independently obtained volunteer work, such as child care work, where all four cases led to paid child care work.

A main program outcome for participants was greater confidence in their ability to communicate in English. Participants realised that while their English may not be grammatically correct, this was not an impediment to helping others. Of more importance was their attitude and disposition. Teachers noted how volunteer work required participants to initiate things, to have the confidence to be actively engaged and that this was an empowering process.

While the orientation training was well received CALD participants' benefit from Powerpoint workshop demonstrations was limited by their English language difficulties. Over the program's four-course period training was progressively modified to better meet the needs of CALD participants.

Volunteer experiences varied. Some participants suffered a form of culture shock in assisting sick and elderly people and dealing with unfamiliar food and cultural habits. Others felt that they were a little rushed and stressed in getting the job done (meals-on-wheels in particular). But despite this most participants persisted with volunteer work. The majority enjoyed the work and felt that they had contributed usefully. Program teachers commented that participants benefited greatly from the work, 'just in self-confidence and in feeling good' about themselves.

This project was a demonstration of 'integrated' language and literacy. The main focus was on vocational preparation. Language and literacy skills were not taught in isolation but linked or 'built in' to authentic tasks required to obtain and maintain volunteer employment. Teachers, for example, referred to role plays as practising the language of formal

interviews. In one situation, a low level spoken English student had to rehearse a meeting with the meals-on-wheels coordinator. The teacher explained:

So we worked out all the questions she needed and she wrote them down. We did some role playing, and we did that three or four times so that she was quite happy. When she came back the next week she said, 'All my questions were answered and I knew what to say and I could say it clearly'.

In other situations the teachers demonstrated 'team lifts' and the handwashing procedures required on the job. Self promotion (referred to by one teacher as a 'personal commercial') was also a feature as participants were required to prepare for volunteer work interviews, plus resumés and an explicit focus on the language aspects of voluntary work:

... we also looked at some of the legislation too ... and also child protection legislation because they had to sign off on those so they could have a police check, and there was quite a lot of complicated language that we needed to talk about, and even some of the abbreviations like AVO ...

Overall, nearly 40 CALD background people participated in volunteer work thus contributing to the community's capacity. Many participants would probably not have found their way into volunteer work without the program. There was evidence that, on a personal level, participants benefited greatly though increased self-confidence and being able to successfully engage with people in mainly English speaking contexts. Many of these participants were older (30 per cent were 55 or more) and volunteering provided a renewed focus, energy and self satisfaction. Personal and community social capital increased substantially through friendships formed when participants joined new organisational networks.

Finally, the project successfully brought together two local and complementary organisations in a harmonious partnership. CCAS at the conclusion of the project better understood the needs of CALD people and Meadowbank TAFE better understood the nature of volunteering. The cooperative relationship between these two organisations endures beyond the funding of this project. ■

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Different Voices, Different Spaces: reflections of a mentor

Delia Bradshaw

In April last year, an unexpected invitation came my way. My acceptance changed the course of my professional life. Let me tell you some of the story. I remember the day well. It was just before 8 a.m. on a Friday morning.

Would you like to be an educational mentor? Asked the unfamiliar voice on the other end of the 'phone.

What does that mean? I wondered out loud.

The voice proceeded to tell me about three 'New Practices' projects featuring voice technologies.

I'm certainly interested enough, I replied, *for you to send the background reading.*

Initially, I was a little hesitant. By any measure, I was a novice in e-learning. On the other hand, I am very experienced in curriculum and professional development. For nearly 30 years, I have worked in adult education, in many roles and many contexts that include universities, TAFE institutes, government departments, community agencies and ACE organisations.

After considerable thought, I decided that my comprehensive adult education experience would bring a fresh perspective to the world of post-compulsory e-education. As well, and this strengthened my resolve, I would represent thousands of teachers like me, on the border of online teaching and learning, who know enough to want to know more but not enough to proceed confidently. My Yes began my life as an educational mentor for what came to be known as the *Different Voices, Different Spaces (DVDS)* project.

The DVDS project incorporated a number of initiatives. The name is intended to include the range of teachers, learners, practices, contexts and perspectives covered by the three 2005 'New Practices' projects involved, all funded by the Australian Flexible Learning Framework. The purpose of each of the three projects was to examine voice technologies and related social practices in a range of adult education and vocational training environments. The names of the three 'New Practices' projects are:

1. *Beyond Text*: using your voice online
2. *Connecting the Dots*: breaking down the barriers to participation
3. *Social Interaction Packs*: overcoming social barriers to online learning.

Links for each of the projects are provided in the **References** section but a brief description of each now follows.

Beyond Text, a joint initiative involving AMES, Gipps TAFE and TAFE SA, examines the use of online voice tools for teaching and learning. The resulting resource provides models of practice, sample online tools, case studies and a framework for moving beyond text and integrating online voice technologies into education and training.

Connecting The Dots, based in the adult community education (ACE) sector, examines the potential of podcasting as an additional e-learning tool for learners

with little time to attend face-to-face classes, isolated by their geographic location or with physical or learning disabilities. The final documents provide a set of case studies, guidelines and resources to assist ACE and VET organisations to further investigate podcasting.

Social Interaction Packs, under Chisholm TAFE Institute's auspices, examined the social barriers often associated with online learning and proposed some practical solutions. The resulting resources provide case studies for various learning areas and a searchable resource for teachers and trainers to access practices, strategies and examples.

So, as an educational mentor, what did I do?

First and foremost, I identified as 'a teacher'. From the beginning, I immersed myself as fully as possible in the three online voice projects, *Beyond Text*, *Connecting the Dots* and *Social Interaction Packs*. I eagerly explored the new domains they were opening up, always considering them from an adult educator's point of view. When visiting the three project sites or talking with the project participants, always at the forefront of my mind was: *What is going on here, educationally speaking? What does it all mean for teachers? What lessons can be learnt to improve teaching and learning?*

Drawing on my multi-faceted experience in adult education curriculum and professional development, I found I was able to supplement and complement the projects, educationally speaking, by suggesting ways of reviewing or re-imagining educational perspectives and program possibilities. All the time, I foregrounded the following priorities:

- experimenting with dozens of new e-resources and e-spaces
- reading widely
- observing carefully the teaching and learning taking place in the projects
- applying global research findings to local educational developments and priorities
- asking generative questions, not only about the WHAT but also about the WHY
- identifying educational themes
- sharing findings across the project groups
- responding promptly to educational dilemmas or difficulties, to draft reports or evaluations, to group discussions and network activities
- keeping a detailed journal recording my readings, experiences, observations and discoveries
- developing a conceptual model of 'good practice'
- producing a written synthesis as a report and professional development materials.

Day to day, this meant:

conversations, meetings, classroom modelling, online ▶



networks and activities, blogging, collective problem solving, curriculum design suggestions, focus groups, research applications, conceptual mapping, and journal writing.

I spent hours, long days and long nights, following up leads, trying new technologies, participating in new networks, registering on online domains, practising my fledgling e-life skills. Though identifying as 'a teacher', I was consciously and deliberately 'a learner'.

You may well be thinking: what has all this to do with adult literacy? Speaking generally, this project is an eloquent reminder of the value and significance of reflectiveness in our educational practice, of creating regular opportunities for us to mentor each other, to share views, voices and visions.

In particular, *Different Voices, Different Spaces* spotlights the centrality of 'voice' in online education. Human voices are powerful. When I asked friends the difference between hearing and reading Martin Luther King's *I have a dream speech*, I was told *It's hearing his voice that makes all the difference; it's the emotional impact*. The spoken word is immediate and intimate. It is compact and economical. The subtleties of intonation carry layers of meaning. The spoken voice integrates body, mind and feelings.

The three 'New Practices' projects celebrate the human voice. They are part of a widespread movement ensuring

a central place for the spoken voice in e-learning. The spoken voice is a powerful complement as well as an extension of the written word. That said, it is not a question of one OR the other being superior. Rather, it is a matter of valuing both modes in online learning, being clear about the virtues and limitations of each.

The three projects that make up *Different Voices, Different Spaces* concentrate on articulating the strengths (though not overlooking the weaknesses) of the spoken word online. The information below is an abbreviated version of a table distilled largely from the findings of the three projects featured in the DVDS report. The table illustrates some of the educational repertoire—technological and pedagogical—described in greater detail in the project resources.

Voice online certainly promotes speaking but, equally importantly, it also foregrounds listening, especially listening to voices otherwise unheard. Consider the podcasting site, *Global Voices Online*, for example. Its motto is: *The world is talking. Are you listening?* It is an international effort to diversify online conversations by involving speakers from around the world, building bridges by talking about their country or region to a global audience. As the website says:

Global Voices is your guide to the most interesting conversations, information and ideas appearing around the world through participatory media such as blogs, podcasts, photo sharing sites and videoblogs.

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Technology	Pedagogical virtues	Limitations	Special mention
Podcasting	It is portable, not time restricted. Automatic subscription enables regular downloads of programs of interest.	If podcasts are long, monotonous monologues, they may require images animation to convey ideas better.	As an alternative to text-based resources, it is a way of overcoming some literacy problems. It democratizes publication.
Audio/ Voice Board	Teachers and learners can post voice messages with accompanying printed text messages into threaded message boards. Students can listen to a recording as often as needed and re-record until satisfied with the result.	Reviewing learners' voice postings takes more time for teachers than reviewing text submissions. Voice postings cannot be scanned as can a written text.	Teachers can provide models of, and pronunciation practice for, learning outcomes that require correct pronunciation.
Virtual Classroom	The virtual classroom is communication-rich, providing a range of interactive, collaborative tools to foster socially engaging online learning.	Managing the voice and text areas at the same time with only one facilitator is challenging. It's best if there are two facilitators.	It offers the use of multiple simultaneous communications, for example, audio chat, text messaging and whiteboard facilities.
Audio/ Voice Chat	Voice chat provides new ways of creating a sense of community, of engaging learners who prefer oral communication.	Participants need to know the various aspects of audio control.	Voice chat may sometimes promote deeper learning than text chat. Learners with poor keyboard skills can concentrate on the discussion instead of their typing.
Voice E-mail	It is especially good for introductions, icebreaker activities, announcements and reminders about tasks due.	When using text based email, 'select reply' to return a message is simple. This is not the case in all voice email applications.	For important announcements, voice emails can reach learners not inclined to read written information.
Audio Blogging	While voice boards are an effective discussion tool for learners enrolled in courses, audioblogs are more personalised, a simple means of creating personal or interactive webpages that remain active post-course.	Students may need to pay for the costs incurred using their own 'phone to post messages.	Audioblogs may provide an accessible online communication for shy learners or those who prefer oral or auditory learning.

The professional development requirements of Workplace English Language and Literacy practitioners

***A report on a NCVER research project:
The professional development needs of
Workplace English language and Literacy
Programme practitioners. Berghella,
Molenaar and Wyse 2006.***

Introduction

The work environment of Workplace English Language and Literacy Program (WELL) practitioners, like other LLN and VET teachers, has undergone significant change. These changes pose potential tensions for practitioners who need to respond to the impact of these changes on a broad range of stakeholders, including themselves, while continuing to develop educational and learning programs.

We were interested in exploring how WELL practitioners responded to these challenges and how supported they are in terms of professional development opportunities. As managers/practitioners who tally up many years of experience between us, we were also aware of the additional pressures that are already impacting on the WELL programme, such as the relative aging of the teaching workforce and the few new entrants to the field.

Given the plethora of concerns we focussed on professional development in terms of:

- The changing nature of WELL work
- the current WELL workforce
- what professional development is currently on offer
- what are the priority areas of professional development both now and in 5 years time

Methodology

We started out by undertaking a Literature Review. While we found some useful background information on VET and LLN teachers generally, no research had been conducted specifically on LLN practitioners working in the WELL Programme.

A questionnaire was constructed and emailed to 106 training providers at RTOs delivering WELL. To maximize support for the project, each manager was rung prior to being sent the questionnaire and was asked to forward it on to staff.

Respondents were asked in the questionnaire whether they would be willing to participate in a follow up interview,

either face to face or by telephone. The purpose of this was to explore some of the issues that had been identified in the original questionnaires and to give space for individual stories which practitioners wanted to share.

Although not originally included in the project plan, an additional response group - programme managers, were also included as an interview group. We believed that it would be interesting to see whether their perceptions of both current and future issues impacting on practitioners and the role of professional development matched those put forward by practitioners.

We were able to have some more detailed discussions in two workshops which were held by Manufacturing Learning Victoria as part of their WELL practitioner network meetings. During the first workshop, some of the issues raised by the email questionnaire were explored. Findings generated from the research and possible implications were discussed during the second workshop.

What people said

In order to determine how well current professional development opportunities meet the needs of practitioners and what future needs might be, we needed to obtain a clear picture of the skills that are currently required by practitioners and how these might change over the next five years.

As well as having an understanding and knowledge of teaching LLN to adults, WELL practitioners are expected to:

- consult, liaise and negotiate with multiple stakeholders
- manage projects
- develop customized teaching/training resources
- team teach
- develop assessment materials
- co assess with workplace assessors
- support other teachers/trainers

In addition to this broad range of tasks both practitioners and managers indicated that to work in the WELL programme, practitioners need to be:

- flexible
- independent
- tactful
- non-judgmental, empathetic
- able to think on their feet
- responsive to a range of stakeholders
- aware of different agendas, including personal agendas
- confident and experienced in dealing with adults
- able to self-reflect and evaluate practice
- able to demonstrate good communication skills

Most respondents, at both practitioner and managerial level, felt that the next five years would not be significantly different from the current situation. They identified a number of issues that will continue to place pressure on WELL practitioners. These include:

- the need to gain certification in areas other than LLN ►

news snippet

- dealing with an increasingly diverse range of learner groups including front line managers
- ability to develop resources and deliver training using new technologies

We then looked at the support that is currently offered as well as the types of professional development required to support practitioners into the future.

The majority of practitioners said that they were thrown in at the deep end when they first joined the WELL programme and that there was very little professional development that was directly targeted to their needs. They commented on the lack of opportunities to network with other practitioners, both within their own organisation and from other RTOs. A number of practitioners commented that this lack of collegiate support meant that they often developed resources in isolation to their colleagues so that skills and knowledge are not shared across the system possibly resulting in unnecessary duplication of materials.

When asked to list what professional development opportunities had been accessed over the past two years, 36% said none and 38% identified VET workshops with only 7% nominating LLN specific workshops. However, we were not sure whether the results reflected diminishing professional development opportunities, whether what was on offer was not seen as relevant or whether if practitioners

are not paid they do not attend or a combination of these. For casual or sessional teachers the costs associated with attending, both in terms of possibly passing up work and attendance costs, may make it prohibitive.

Given that WELL practitioners, (and other VET practitioners), tend to be in the mature age groups, it is imperative that new teachers are recruited and supported. The professional development needs therefore of new entrants and experienced practitioners will vary.

Current practitioners noted that shadowing of, and mentoring by, experienced practitioners are the most helpful forms of support for new entrants. This could be supplemented by workshops on reporting requirements which would also allow for sharing of experiences and sharing of case studies on common issues faced by the WELL practitioner.

Four key areas of support were identified for the experienced WELL practitioner. These included:

- workplace environment such as workplace issues, government policies, the VET system and new technologies in the workplace
- program management including project/client management, writing applications, writing reports, using new technologies

From page 12

Different Voices, Different Spaces: reflections of a mentor

A local blog, *Our Class 2006*, another bridge-builder, also integrates voice with other online media. This marvellous example of blended, rich learning describes itself as:

A blog for an Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) class at St George College of TAFE, Sydney Institute, Australia. There are podcasts, quizzes, competitions, links to students' own blogs, students' recipes, photos and a lot more.

You should visit the *Podcast directory for educators, schools and colleges* where you will find a wealth of topics, speakers and perspectives, an infinite number of opportunities to listen and respond. I urge you to visit the sites listed below. I am confident you will be excited to discover the ever-expanding quantity and quality of Different Voices in Different Spaces. New voices of adult literacy teachers and students appear online each day. Teachers and learners are discovering voices not previously heard, including new voices of their own.

Introducing teachers and learners to voice tools, their related social practices and a whole new world, as demonstrated by *Different Voices, Different Spaces*, is a gift for life. Teachers and learners have acquired extra resources to add to their repertoire as independent lifelong learners and they have practised new possibilities in community participation. Other important discoveries have been made too. They have learnt the importance of evaluation; they have learnt new ways to value themselves and others as well as new ways to evaluate the information, ideas and voices that compete daily for their attention. Long after

formal ties with education have passed these educational gifts will endure. They are precious gifts considered by many scholars to be essential pre-requisites for navigating today's complex, often contradictory, world. ■

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N.B. The URLs below can all be found on my podOmatic site, *Delia's podcast*, at <http://snipurl.com/x2m2>, where you will be able to connect directly to the links listed.

New Practices Audioblog: <http://npaudio.blogspot.com/>

Different Voices, Different Spaces: <http://dvds.flexiblelearning.net.au/index.html>

For free CDs of Different Voices, Different Spaces, contact Ros.Howell@westone.wa.gov.au.

Beyond Text: <http://btresource.flexiblelearning.net.au/index.html>

Connecting the Dots: <http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au/flx/go/home/projects/2005/connectdots>

Social Interaction Packs report: <http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au/flx/go/home/projects/2005/pid/125>

Social Interaction Packs resource: <http://sipresource.flexiblelearning.net.au/index.html>

Global Voices Online: <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/globalvoices/top/about-global-voices/>

Our class 2006: <http://ourclass2006.blogspot.com/>

Podcast directory for educators, schools and colleges: <http://recap.ltd.uk/podcasting/index.php>

Different Voices, Different Spaces, can be found online at <http://snipurl.com/t7iq>

- LLN practice such as new debates in the field, using new and emerging technologies as teaching tools, identifying LLN in workplace tasks and practices, supporting content specialists in their understanding of LLN in the workplace
- VET system for example training packages, accredited training

Professional development can be accessed through a range of options. These will be more or less appropriate depending on the content to be covered and the time available for practitioners to engage in such activities. We identified conferences, networking, workshops, moderation/validation and other such as online reading of journals. How these options then translate into action becomes the issue.

Talking to practitioners in this study, reinforced our view that one of the critical functions of professional development is to provide the space for reflection and questioning of practice including looking at shared assumptions of literacy, at the need to continually reread literacy in new and emerging political, economic and social contexts. If spaces are not created this critical ability to challenge and reframe shared understandings of literacy will be lost. How do we ensure that these opportunities are made available? ■

From page 8

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ACAL Conference 2006 – ‘Literacy it’s everyone’s business’

news snippet

Sue McKay is a community coordinator with the volunteer literacy scheme in Western Australia, the Read Write Now! Program.

The Read Write Now! Program is celebrating its 30th anniversary in December and Sue has been volunteering with the program since 1995. Sponsorship from the WA Adult Literacy Council and the WA Department of Education and Training enabled Sue to attend this year’s national conference in Adelaide.

My initial feelings of apprehension as a ‘lay’ person amongst so many professional literacy practitioners were soon put to rest as the conference got underway. The content offered something for everyone in keeping with the conference theme ‘Literacy it’s everyone’s business.’

I selected my workshops/presentations carefully (so many to choose from);

- Is this something I can pass on to volunteer tutors?
- Is it relevant to me, as a volunteer?
- Will it enhance my volunteer work as a coordinator?
- Will it enrich my volunteering experience?

There were varying attitudes to volunteers in the literacy field amongst the delegates present. Ranging from delight and genuine interest to ‘well you can’t rely on volunteers’ and ‘...of course none of this is relevant for volunteer tutors’.

Fortunately this was not a common occurrence, volunteer tutors may not be paid but that does not mean their work is of lesser value and I met many delegates who had high regard for the volunteer sector in the literacy field.

As to my previous dot points - where do I start! The workshop ‘Connecting Voices’ presenter Robyn Jay, gave an overview of ‘social software’ such as ‘blogs’ ‘wikis’ and group bookmarking. These free web-based tools enable people to connect and to form online communities. One on one tutoring can be isolating so I will be exploring these tools as methods of networking between tutors and new learning experiences for students. (For further information on ‘social software’ visit http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_software) ▶

Got a hobbyhorse? Like to see yourself in print? Contact the Editor, Philip Baram, to discuss the topic and length of your article. Philip can be contacted by email at ladycarolineb@bigpond.com. Literacy Link readers most want to know about practice, research and current projects.

◀ The Volunteer Literacy Tutor Support Project (VOLTS) gave a preview of 'Literacy Face to Face' a resource to assist volunteer tutors and others who want to help someone improve their literacy. 'Literacy Face to Face' will be online at www.lg.tafensw.edu.au/facetoface from mid November and will augment the training materials and resources currently available to volunteer tutors in Western Australia and other states. It will also be available as a hard copy in book and CD form.

Darryl Dymock's summary of findings from the NCVER Research Project on Community Adult Language, Literacy and Numeracy Provision in Australia, gave an insight into literacy practice among non accredited programs in other states. Students in such programs do not always have pathways or measurable outcomes in human capital however the social capital is significant. To remain a relevant force we need to continually ensure that student

assessment, monitoring, tutor and coordinator training is of a high quality.

I left the conference abuzz with the richness of diversity the literacy field offers, eager to return to Perth to assimilate all that I had been exposed to. My thanks to the WAALC committee for their assistance. The networking and information gathered will I have no doubt enhance my work as a volunteer coordinator. I have gained some insight into the issues faced by those who work within the LL&N field and a greater appreciation of the flexibility I have as a volunteer!

During the conference I was concerned to hear of policies in regard to human capital (or should that be cattle?). To ensure that social outcomes remain of equal importance, it is essential that we all become informed as to the issues facing the literacy field today. Is literacy everyone's business? It sure is. ■

ACAL contact details

www.acal.edu.au

EXECUTIVE

President:

Margaret McHugh
Principal Consultant, Literacy
WA Dept of Education and Training
margaret.mchugh@det.wa.edu.au
Ph: 08 92644638

Secretary:

Debbie Soccio
debbie.soccio@vu.edu.au

Treasurer:

Lorraine Sushames
lorraine.sushames@cdu.edu.au
Ph: 08 89467219

Co-opted

Robyn Jay
robyn.jay@det.nsw.edu.au
Ph: 02 66287499

Pauline O'Maley
omaley@mira.net
Ph: 0418 357958

STATE REPRESENTATIVES

ACT

Christine O'Callaghan
christine.ocallaghan@cit.act.edu.au
Ph: 02 6207 4054

NSW

Jill Finch
TAFE Sydney Institute
Jill.Finch@det.nsw.edu.au
Ph 02 9217 3732

NT

Ian Falk
Ian.Falk@cdu.edu.au
Ph: 08 89466051

QLD

Shirley Beall
s.beall@optusnet.com.au
Ph: 07 3422 1177

SA

Jane Gunn
janegunn@proteatraining.com.au
Ph: 08 84402417

VIC

Yvonne Russell
yvonne.russell@kangan.edu.au

WA

Jim Plumridge
bjp@westnet.com.au
Ph: 08 9921 1982

TAS

Jakki Bourke
jakkibourke@bigpond.com

STATE AFFILIATE COUNCILS

ACTCAL

PO Box 778
Jarnison ACT 2614
Christine.OCallaghan@cit.act.edu.au

NSW ALNC

PO Box K450
Haymarket NSW 1240
Renata.Atkin@uts.edu.au
nswalnc@uts.edu.au

NTCAL

Ian Falk
PO Box 31U
Charles Darwin University
Darwin NT 0909
Ian.Falk@cdu.edu.au

QCAL

Queensland Council for Adult Literacy
Inc
P.O. Box 301 RED HILL Q 4059
Phone/Fax (07) 3878 9944
info@qcal.org.au
www.qcal.org.au

SACAL

PO Box 610
Magill SA 5072
tess.vincent@tafesa.edu.au

TCAL

PO Box 904
Devenport
Tasmania 7310
jakkibourke@bigpond.com

VALBEC

Box 861
Springvale South VIC 3172
info@valbec.org.au
www.valbec.org.au

WAALC

19 Brittain Street
COMO WA 6152
robyn.rennie@gmail.com
helen.grimston@central.wa.edu.au

EXECUTIVE SUPPORT

Don MacDowall
PO Box 2283
Canberra ACT 2601
Ph: (03) 9546 6892
Fax: (03) 9546 0421
Email: acal@pacific.net.au



Australian Government
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