



Lifelong learning for all – but how accessible is it?

by Cheryl Balaam

Adult Learning Commentary Number 21, 25 July 2001

We all talk about the importance of lifelong learning for all, of access and equity, the Clever Nation, upskilling and qualifications and *we* believe that community education is the best option, but how accessible is learning to rurally isolated adults in Australia? The answer (according to some city folk) is simple: “Give them computers and they can learn through the internet.”

In reality this is not so simple. What about those who cannot afford to purchase and then continue to maintain and update a computer, the cost of ISP connection, the time involved in actually connecting (up to 30 mins) and lack of technical and educational support? Telecentres are providing some access but travel for some is prohibitive. And is there childcare and are they open at night?

Most ‘online’ courses are of an academic nature, but what about non-accredited general courses? How do people develop their literacy skills? How do adults become computer literate in the first place? Frustration is very common, small problems with computers become huge when there is no one accessible to help solve them.

We all know how learning with others is important, to solve problems, to see others struggling to learn like yourself, to gain and share ideas, see models, and have something in common with others. Isolated learners suffer segregation and often lack of timely support leading to frustration and lack of motivation.

How do isolated learners receive training in vocational skills? How do they upskill or reskill? Rurally isolated people lack access to Registered Training Organisations able to deliver accredited and vocational training.

During a recent ABC radio talkback program, listeners rang up relating their experiences of online learning, raising many of the above issues.

What can be done?

Resources must be put into setting up and supporting community organisations in very small communities. England puts \$1.2 billion dollars into basic adult education yet has none of the distance and isolation issues faced by Australians.

Awareness needs to increase about the issues faced by very small communities. There is little awareness or understanding of the issues in the capital or even large rural cities, and small communities feel disenfranchised, powerless and forgotten.

Bureaucrats believe student enrolments are too small to be viable, and are keen to close down small centres already providing programs. Surely a community of 200 showing enrolments of 120 in a year is a vibrant centre worthy of support?

Putting in government money is one answer but the community needs to be responsible too. Some small communities I have contact with are lethargic and complacent, not actively supporting a funded adult education centre, while others’ centres are vibrant and the hub of the community. I strongly believe the commitment of the Manager and Committee is vital for the success of a small adult education organisation.

There is also the issue of changing the learning culture of small communities. People must believe that lifelong learning is valuable. I think this is happening, albeit slowly.

Inroads are being made to provide access to lifelong learning for the rurally isolated, but to provide people with their right to fundamental education, investments need to be made.