Understand *your* WORLD

The Adult Learners' Week 2003 Adult Literacy Scrapbook

Adult Learning
Australia Inc.

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Cover photos from left to right: *The Great Literacy Debate, Hume Global Learning Centre, Victoria; Literacy course for women, Fogo, Cape Verde (photo: UNESCO/D. Roger); Author and former footballer, Garry Lyon, with a fan at the Great Literacy debate, Hume Global Learning Centre, Victoria; Adult literacy class, Barcelona, Spain (photo: UNESCO/A. Jonquières).*

Illiteracy and innumeracy are a greater threat to humanity than terrorism*

* Nobel Prize-winner Amaratya Sen

According to the 2003 EFA Global Monitoring Report, 860 million adults worldwide are illiterate.

In Australia today, one in five adults does not have the literacy skills to effectively participate in everyday life.

Around 45 per cent of Australian adults have inadequate literacy to cope in a sophisticated economy.

According to Australian Bureau of Statistics figures:

- 6.2 million Australian adults were likely to experience difficulty using everyday printed materials;
- 4.8 million Australian adults have just sufficient literacy skills to cope; and
- 2.3 million Australian adults are considered capable of managing the literacy demands of everyday life.

Different types of literacy

Prose literacy is the ability to understand and use information from various kinds of prose texts, such as texts from newspapers, magazines and brochures.

Documentary literacy is the ability to locate and use information contained in materials such as tables, schedules, charts, graphs and maps.

Quantitative literacy is the ability to perform arithmetic operations using numbers contained in printed texts or documents.

Persistent adult illiteracy is a problem in many industrialized countries. The International Adult Literacy Survey ranked Australia fourth in the world for prose literacy — after Sweden, Netherlands and Canada — sixth for documentary literacy and eighth for quantitative literacy. The US and the United Kingdom were both ranked behind Australia.

The table below shows the Australian distribution of literacy and numeracy skills, by percentage (from the OECD International Adult Literacy Survey).

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5
Prose	19.7	27.5	35.3	15.5	2.0
Document	19.5	28.3	36.1	14.2	1.9
Quantitative	19.2	27.2	36.0	15.2	2.4

This table shows the proportion of the Australian population performing in relation to determined levels for the information age. Those at Level 3 are struggling to keep up, while those at Level 4 and 5 can participate.

These figures underline the urgent need to give adult literacy greater emphasis at all political, policy and economic levels.

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Are you literate?

Does the ability to read and write make you literate? If you can't send a text message on your mobile phone does that mean you are illiterate? Are you financially literate? How do you know? Do you become illiterate when you travel? Is visual literacy a universal literacy? Do you need to be literate?

The United National Literacy Decade commenced in 2003. To coincide with this international project, the national focus of Australia's Adult Learners' Week in that year was adult literacy in all its forms.

This scrapbook captures some of the many activities that took place in Australia during or around the time of Adult Learners' Week with a focus on adult literacy. Two major activities, in particular, are featured in this publication, the national Adult Learners' Week Writing Competition and the Great Literacy Debate.

Presented in association with the Australian Society of Authors the writing competition asked authors to write about what life might be — or is — without literacy. Some of the shortlisted entries appear in this publication. They were selected because they offer some insight into a world without literacy.

The Great Literacy Debate project was a series of around 20 locally organised debates and discussions. Most of the debates took the form of a traditional three-person a side 'for' and 'against' competition. Some were panel discussions, while others were presented as online forums.

'Probably half of our workers have a literacy problem which is a real worry for us. They have to work with chemicals and need to be able to read and comprehend the instructions on the packets. A solicitor has told us that if one of them has an accident, because of their inability to read, we, their employer, will be liable.'

Farm manager, caller to the Reading Writing Hotline, Bundaberg QLD, 12 June 2003

Literacy class for women, Tunisia (photo: UNESCO/D. Roger)

Three topics were proposed for the Great Literacy Debate and many of the activities focussed on one of these topics:

- that literacy is the cornerstone of democracy
- that literacy is defined by context
- that it is better to be literate than to be able to fish

You will find quotes from some of the debates scattered throughout this scrapbook. Some will may make you laugh, some could anger you, others may make you nod your head in agreement. All are designed to stimulate your own thinking about what literacy is and how important is it. The questions raised throughout this scrapbook should stimulate many fruitful discussions with friends, family and colleagues.

It is somewhat ironic that we should have developed a publication about adult literacy — and the difficulties caused by adult illiteracy — which relies so heavily on the printed word. These pages have been written by people who are literate for other people who are literate about people who are not. Had we had the money we might have presented this information in the form of a film, to make it accessible to people with all levels of literacy.

Nevertheless, we have included the voices of those with poor literacy. To do so we had to transcribe oral communication into a format that the speakers themselves may not be able to use. It must be borne in mind, therefore, that the voices of those with poor literacy appearing in this book do so only as a transcription, an approximation, of thoughts and ideas communicated through oral

means. You will see that these voices are articulate and among the greatest advocates for literacy.

Adult Learners' Week is an international celebration and promotion of all forms of adult learning that takes place each year in Australia in the first week of Spring. It is an opportunity for providers of adult learning, formal and informal, large and small, to bring their work to the attention of their local community, the media and politicians. It is also an opportunity to celebrate the inspirational journeys of so many adults who return to learning later in life.

In Australia, many thousands of people help make Adult Learners' Week a truly successful national event. It would be impossible to name all of the local event coordinators, helpers and participants here, but Adult Learning Australia would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge their hard work and to thank them for contributing to the continued growth of Adult Learners' Week.

We would like to thank, in particular, all of the people who participated in the Great Literacy Debate or who submitted an entry to the Adult Learners' Week 2003 Writers' Competition. We would like too to thank the many people who have helped us at Adult Learning Australia to develop a national Adult Learners' Week focus around the theme of adult literacy.

Finally we would like to acknowledge the valuable contribution that the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) makes to Adult Learners' Week. ANTA provides ALA a grant to coordinate the national elements of the Week and also allocates money to the States and Territories to support their Adult Learners' Week work.

— The Adult Learners' Week national coordination team

- To find out more about Adult Learners' Week, visit www.adultlearnersweek.org or phone 1300 303 212
- To find out more about ALA visit www.ala.asn.au
- For assistance in finding a literacy program contact the Reading Writing Hotline 1300 6 555 06
- To find out more about ANTA visit www.anta.gov.au
- To find out more about adult literacy in Australia contact the Australian Council for Adult Literacy (ACAL): www.acal.edu.au

What is Literacy?

A democratic society requires a whole range of literacies — for the family, social life, institutions, the workplace and the public domain. Literacy is happening all the time — when you watch a film, when you watch TV, when you send an SMS message, send an e-mail, read a book, a letter, footy guides… Literacy is the ability to inquire about the world, to access information, to share ideas and to speak up.

from the Hume Great Literacy Debate

National Literacy and Numeracy Week 2003 Minister's Awards for Outstanding Contribution to Improving Literacy or Numeracy winner — Kathleen Napier, Read Write Now!, WA

Photo: DEST

Kathleen Napier's contribution to improving literacy and numeracy encompasses five decades. It is estimated that 25,000 adults have benefited directly from the one-to-one tuition offered and that Ms Napier has personally supported approximately 1,500 tutors during her involvement with this volunteer tutor program. In Ms Napier's own local region, there are approximately 70 tutors who are assisting over 80 students each year.

As a result of the grant associated with this award, and with the help of the two other local Read Write Now coordinators, Kath has been able to inaugurate a long-term series of short courses designed to appeal to people living in areas where the motivation to learn can sometimes be low.

Adult literacy students, Barcelona, Spain (photo: UNESCO/ A. Jonquires)

How do you decide someone is illiterate?

I am literate in English, I struggle with Kriol, and I know very few words from my trainees' other languages. Does this give me the right to consider my trainees to be illiterate because the course materials I have to deliver have been written in my language? Perhaps I am actually illiterate, as my trainees outnumber me by at least ten-to-one. Perhaps the course materials need to be translated and I need to learn a new language so I can communicate more effectively with my trainees.

from the Flexible Learning Framework online forum

SA Adult Learners' Week 2003 Outstanding (Paid) Tutor award winner — Afke Deynum

Photo: SA DFEEST

A Language educator at Morella, St Patrick's and Burton Community House, Afke works with people in some of Adelaide's most disadvantaged communities.

Her dedication and commitment has resulted in enormous outcomes for Morella and other organisations which are part of the Salisbury Neighbourhood House program. She has been instrumental in the development of the language program, which in the past two years has expanded from two classes a week to four at Morella and two outreach classes at Burton.

Afke's teaching is innovative and she continually looks at new ways of developing the program by finding ways to improve it for the benefit of her students.

She works well beyond the requirements of her job description, including making considerable sacrifices of her personal time for the benefit of the language program.

Afke also manages to maintain her own professional development through attendance at numerous network meetings, conferences and other professional development opportunities.

Can literacy make you rich?

A large proportion of our current crop of successful entrepreneurs are marginally literate, but that doesn't stop them from employing or using staff that are more skilled in areas that they are not.

from the Flexible Learning Framework online forum

Scenes from the Adult Learners' Week 2003 Great Literacy Debate, Hume Global Learning Centre, Victoria

'I work helping my community but it's real hard sometimes when I have to do something for someone and I can't read or write'.

Male caller to the Reading Writing Hotline, 34, Tennant Creek NT
30 May 2003

National Literacy and Numeracy Week 2003 Minister's Awards for Outstanding Contribution to Improving Literacy or Numeracy winner — Narrellae Simpson, Queensland

Photo: DEST

Ms Simpson has lived in Goodna, Queensland for over 20 years and is a well known and respected member of the Ipswich community. She is a community advocate in the true sense of the word and has established close relationships with community members at all levels. Narrellae works as a volunteer with a number of agencies; she assists and supports the development of many community programs, including literacy programs. In 2002, she supported over 38 members of the Indigenous community into literacy programs.

She has established literacy training courses to help members of the Indigenous community obtain their driver's licence, learner permit, forklift ticket and computer literacy. The course Literacy for Driver Learner Permits was recently picked up and is being run by the Department of Main Roads in Queensland for prison inmates.

When you think about it, who is wealthier? A person who is so wise they can read the words of poems, understand the movements of fish, read the ocean instead of books, and actually put food on the table — for themselves, their families and others. Or the person who is fluent in all sorts of literate knowledge and lives in the world of theory and books… You can read a million fishing magazines and still not learn a damn thing.

from the Southbank TAFE Great Literacy Debate

Are new literacies being created all the time?

A new form of communication such as SMS becomes a new literacy when people feel they have to learn it, in order to communicate with their peers… I think the use of a new technology or communication form becomes accepted as a form of literacy when the majority of people understand and are fluent in it. For specialist or academic literacies, however, this acceptance or understanding applies to the number of people within the specialist field, rather than the general population.

from the Flexible Learning Framework online forum

'I am looking for work but I haven't a clue how to write a job application. I'm worried that when I ring up an employer, I will sound uneducated and won't get a look-in.'

Male caller to the Reading Writing Hotline, aged 35, Burnie, TAS 11 June 2003

Photo: NSW DET/ P. Hutchinson

NSW Adult Learners' Week 2003 Outstanding Tutor award winner — Brad Nichol, Southern Region Community College

Brad has been teaching and coordinating Adult Literacy programs concurrently in Corrective Services (Goulburn Gaol) for the last 17 years and in the Adult and Community Education sector for the last seven years at Southern Region Community College.

He has had outstanding success with particular groups of learners and has taught a range of literacy students from educational and socially disadvantaged backgrounds, for example, inmates in Goulburn Gaol, mature-aged men and women, early school leavers, and isolated rural males. During the 1990s, Brad ran Skill Share programs and taught a range of life skills to the unemployed in Goulburn, Crookwell and Braidwood. He has been the Mature Workers Programs Manager and Trainer at Southern Region Community College (from 1998 to 2002). He has been responsible for integrating literacy and numeracy skills and support into accredited training.

Photo: Vic ACFE

Victoria Adult Learners' Week 2003 Outstanding Tutor Award finalist — Margaret Morgan, Murray ACE, Swan Hill

Apart from describing her as a dear friend and mentor, many of Margaret Morgan's students say that her strengths lie in developing individual learning activities so that students can work at their own pace. Ms Morgan's involvement in education stretches as far back as 1969. She has worked in adult education since 1990.

Murray ACE's further study coordinator Lyn Gadsden says an example of Ms Morgan's outstanding abilities is seen in her work with a Down's Syndrome student who came to the centre as a non-reader. "Margaret was able to teach her simple sentences, building up her confidence, and as a result she found work in a local restaurant," Ms Gadsden said. "Margaret has a remarkable ability to create a special culture in the classroom, making her students feel valued, improving their self-esteem and ultimately enhancing their social and academic achievements."

Queensland Adult Learners' Week 2003 Outstanding Provider award winner — ARMS Annerley Literacy Centre, Brisbane

The Annerley Literacy Centre helps refugees and migrants gain the skills they need to participate actively in life in their new country. The centre offers English classes, computer and internet classes, and literacy tuition. Homework assistance programs help school students whose parents are not able to help because of language difficulties, and adult learners who are undertaking further education.

Beyond language and literacy classes, the centre provides community building activities and individual support. For example the centre provides computer and Internet access, and participated in the Brisbane City Council's Refugees Online project to help overcome barriers to computer use by refugee communities.

The centre provides a flexible, non-threatening environment where women can bring their children, and people can make friends and gain confidence.

The ARMS team, from left to right: Sandra Waterton (Manager's Assistant), Tamara Curtis (Core Funding Worker), George Eichinski (Literacy Centre Coordinator), Kareena Clifford (Manager ARMS) and Deborah Stafford (Coordinator ARMS Employment Project) (Photo: QLD DET)

'My goal is to go to university. I'm 36 and have spent the last 20 years raising children and doing mind-numbing part-time work. It's so long since I was in a classroom. I'm worried I won't be able to cope with written assignments. I know nothing about computers and the internet.'

Female caller to the Reading Writing Hotline, Newcastle NSW
11 June 2003

Is literacy necessary?

The Aboriginals of Australia survived for 60,000 years without literacy. They don't need it.

from the Strathfield Great Literacy Debate

Ladies and gentlemen… 46 per cent of the population do not possess the skills needed — considered needed — to survive in today's modern world, but they do get by don't they? Who needs to be literate to survive?

from the Condobolin Great Literacy Debate

Many people manage to operate, and cooperate effectively, without written literacy skills. They may be aware that certain areas of their communication skills are lacking somewhat, but they usually have a contingency plan in place to support them through the 'rough patches'.

from the Flexible Learning online forum

Is Jim literate?

Jim cannot read my language, but he can interpret complex paintings and message sticks, from people other than his own, through his travels throughout the Northern Territory. Jim cannot fill out a form required by the Government to assure he will receive an aged pension. Jim has been a guest of Queen Elizabeth, and he received commendation from our Matriarch for his efforts to represent his people in other countries. Jim is one of the most knowledgeable and talented people I have ever met, and yet he remains humble and thankful. Jim is considered, by the Agency, to be illiterate.

from the Flexible Learning online forum

'I drive trucks and to do my job I should be able to read maps. I can't read the names of towns and spend my time matching the letters on the road signs with those on the maps. Sometimes, matching the highway numbers helps but enough is enough. I'd heard the ads on the radio time and time again and thought, today's the day I'd call you guys.'

Male caller to the Reading Writing Hotline, aged 44, NSW
10 June 2003

Where is literacy taking us?

I'm not literary enough to know exactly how many years ago that the printing press came into being, but I do know this, that with all the millions and millions of words, books, documents, computer documents, e-mails and every form of communication, all the written and read words that you can imagine — I wonder where the world is today. Are we, as a civilisation, any further advanced than those people who live in the Pacific Islands and reap their living from the sea and pass on their stories in song and dance? I don't think so.

from the Southbank Great Literacy Debate

Do you need to be literate to be a genius?

Look around Kiama, at the genius that went into the building of the stone fences around this town, and ask yourself, 'Did that man need to be literate?' Isn't it interesting that we live in a literate age and there's probably nobody in the town who could build those stone fences as well as they were built by an illiterate stonemason.

from the Kiama Great Literacy Debate

Does literacy make you smarter?

Literacy does not remove idiocy. You can still be literate and stupid. It's just that you are stupid on a slightly higher level.

from the Kiama Great Literacy Debate

Literacy, in its most basic form, is how we understand and make sense of the world, giving us the means by which we can attain flexibility and adapt to the changes that are inevitable.

from the Tasmanian online forum

COMPLETING THE CIRCLE by Craig Butler

I rushed home to do my home chores. So I could have a chance to do some homework. But time always beat me. I would have got home round the 4.30 mark. My chores had to be done. There was never any time to do my homework. When there was I couldn't understand it.

I asked my father, "Do you know what this is all about?"

He turned around and said to me, "Boy, have you done your chores? Have you done what you're supposed to do? And if you've got school work, it was meant to be done at school. When you're at home, you're meant to do your chores, not your school work."

I've always wondered why he'd say that to me. But it's only when you grow up I learned that my old man wasn't fully educated. So you understand why schoolwork was meant for school and chores for home.

My mum was a wanderer, a gypsy. She travelled all over Australia. She didn't know how to read or write either. When I travelled with her there were no books or stories read to us.

What I was given were stories told by mouth around the firelight. That was nice to hear. But once you play with other kids you found how far back you was from everyone else. It's not the fault of my parents cause they never got learnt to read and write themselves.

There are gaps in the jigsaw puzzle years ago through my family's background. I wanted to find those pieces and learn so my daughter and my kids don't miss out on the opportunities of life. To not know how to read or write is like looking out of a box with holes in it. You don't have the full picture around you.

Food items are always down to the basics of what is at the front of the counter. What's already cooked at the fast food store. When you got out to the tuckshop, you don't look at the board. It's always something plain and simple.

Off the top of my head, I've done five adult literacy courses. Not completing them makes you feel worse. The amount of times you go through them, the motivation did drop. It made you feel there was something you couldn't learn.

So I want to make sure the hurdles that have been imprinted in my head don't happen to my kids. So I can give my daughter the best chance in life. My ultimate goal would be to lay down and read her a bedtime story. That would fill the jigsaw puzzle and complete the circle.

'I want to be able to win arguments, talk and write the way smart people do and most of all, be somebody who does a job where you are a somebody.'

Male caller to the Reading Writing Hotline, aged 29, Adelaide, 6 June 2002

ANTS GO MARCHING by Joanne Lennan

It's often awkward, when you can't read. It is at times humiliating. At those times, it is as if the words on the page are a mean joke that everyone except for you gets. But most of the time, you can hide it pretty well. You can laugh along, louder than the rest, and no one notices you don't get it. So it isn't until I can't help a little girl I call Miss Jassy with a story about ants that I finally decide to try again to learn.

Jean brings her daughter around on Tuesday nights when she goes to yoga.

"Say hello to your uncle!" she says, as she drops Jasmine off.

"Hello to your uncle!" Jasmine says.

"Hey, Miss Jassy!" Miss Jassy is my name for my niece.

"No telly until your homework's done!" Jean says, kissing her forehead.

Perched on a chair at the kitchen table, Jasmine spreads out her books.

"It's a story about ants," she says, "You have to fill in the blanks with the words from the list at the bottom of the page."

"Really?" I say. I am making us dinner.

"Yep," Jasmine says.

"Cool," I say. Slicing cheese. This kitchen, I am thinking, is an ant story.

"What's for dinner?" She is a fantastic little boss.

"Burgers," I say, "extra special."

"Cool," she says. And she leans over and nicks a piece of cheese and crams it in her mouth.

"Hey!" I say, "Stop that!"

"Mmmhthrmffph," she says. Hers is the last word.

"Read me the story," I say, "I want to hear about these ants."

"Ants," she begins, "Ants live in colonies. Some ants build nests, some are fierce warriors, some collect and store seeds. Ants, like all insects, have an… " Jasmine halts.

"There's another blank space here, but I don't know what word fits it," she says, "What one do you think it is?"

"Oh, Jassy, I wouldn't know."

"You might," she says, holding out her workbook, "Have a look."

"My hands are all messy from the burger mince," I say.

"I'll hold the book and you look," she says, "Okay?" I hold the tea towel in my hands.

"Okay?"

"Okay," I say, "How could I say no to you?" I look at the page in her book. At the top of the page are drawings of insects. Below, the page is covered with words that crawl like black ants across the white of the page. Long ants and short, a colony of ants. I squint and they swarm on the page. What are they saying? I will them to crawl into sense. I will them to reveal their meaning. Give it up, ants! Ants, you! But, as always, they frustrate me. The ratbags. Traitorous words, they lie silent, incomprehensible.

"I don't know for sure, Jassy," I shrug, "It's hard to choose." I turn back to the sink and the construction of the burgers. Slicing tomato. I am pressing down hard with the blade and the seeds spurt out as the tomato bursts. The line of ants marches from the windowsill across the sink. Cursed ants. I would squash them with the butt of the knife, but they just come back.

"Don't you don't know the answer?" says Jasmine, "You're a grown-up." Undeniably, I am a grown up.

"Grown ups don't always know everything," I say.

"Mum knows everything," Jasmine replies.

"She's an exception," I concede.

"But you know what might help?" I say.

"What?"

"Go through and read out each word and see which one sounds right in the sentence."

"Okay," Jasmine says, "Have an yellow, have an queen, have an every? No."

“Have an exoskeleton? Have an exoskeleton! That sounds right! Doesn’t it?” Exoskeleton. A long ant of a word fills the blank.

“That does sound right.” There are more blanks to fill in and Jasmine fills them with different ants that she draws herself with the pencil.

When Jeannie comes back, Jasmine is asleep on the lounge and we have a cup of coffee together. It’s a warm night and we sit on the back porch and look over the rooves at the passing lights of the trucks on the highway.

“Was she good?”

“She was a star.”

“Got her homework done alright?”

“Yeah. Alright. But I wish I could help,” I say, “She thinks I know the answers.”

“Tom. I’m sure you helped a lot.”

“I couldn’t read it for her,” I say. Jean is quiet in the almost-dark. She knows, of course. She used to do my homework. Now she does my taxes.

“I wish I could read your book, Jean.” She’s written a book. It’s about the reproduction of native flora.

“It’s boring, Tom!” she says, “No-one actually wants to read it.”

“I want to read it!”

“It’s eight hundred and thirty-nine pages.”

“Even so.”

“Tom.”

“Jean. I want to read it.”

“Okay.” We sit and watch the lights of the trucks.

I don’t read Jeannie’s book about the reproduction of native flora. Not all eight hundred and thirty-nine pages of it. I read, slowly, the acknowledgements, the table of contents, and the introduction. The ants on the page uncurl themselves and, leg by black leg, become words and sentences. On page sixty-one I discover that many lichens, bryophytes and fungi are entomophilous, which means that insects are involved with the dispersal of spores. Insects help them to survive. To persist.

“It’s very good, Jean“ I say, “It’s a fantastic book.” I put it down carefully on the kitchen table.

“But it is eight hundred and thirty-nine pages long.”

“Yes,” she says, “it is.”

“But it’s amazing.” It astounds me that insects are so important in the reproductive processes of some plants. In the asteraceae family of plants, for example, pollination is by insects. And there are some ants, called leaf-cutter ants, that have the job in the colony of farming fungi. I open the book to my favourite part in the chapter on lichens. On the page the ants go marching. And then there are just words:

In many lichens the upper surface has powdery areas. Insects may carry this powder, or soredia, away to form new lichens elsewhere.

The shapes on the page make words and the words make sense. It is astounding.

I like the sight of the ants now. I imagine that the ants marching are, with their feet, spreading lichen powder with every step. I fancy there will be lichens sprouting soon in the kitchen, one under the table. One from the compost bucket. A bryophyte between the tiles by the fridge. I close the book that Jeannie wrote and we sit together in the quiet of the kitchen with the ants that she and a girl called Miss Jassy taught me to like.

NEXT TIME WON'T YOU SING WITH ME? by Judith Maschmedt

These days my friends gently tease me when I use the American pronunciation, Zee, instead of Zed, but I can still hear the alphabet song ringing in my head, as I remember a time not so long ago when it was the only song I knew how to sing in English.

When I was aged 20, my mother and I left Poland to emigrate to Australia. My father had died several years earlier and my older brother seemed to have died within soon after. He became withdrawn and angry, losing the quirky sense of humour that had always been the bright spark in our otherwise ordinary Warsaw existence, until we rarely saw him any more. Leaving him behind, however, was still one of the hardest things we ever had to face.

My mother's only relatives lived in Canberra, the capital city of Australia, and it wasn't long before they suggested sponsoring us to emigrate. What was left for us in Poland, they asked, now that father was gone? Think about starting a new life in Australia, they urged. Look at us; we have a successful business, a spacious house, and the freedom to say what we think and stand up for what we believe in.

Of everything wonderful that they mentioned in their entreaties to us, I think it was the vision of sunny, light-filled rooms in a house surrounded by a small, neat garden she could lovingly tend, that seduced my mother into the conviction that we would emigrate to Australia. As for me, I just did as I was told! And, though, by the time our visas were granted I had reached adulthood, it seemed that destiny had taken over. I occasionally pondered whether I should stay behind with my brother, but I knew that my mother would never leave us both in Poland without her. The light in her eyes when she spoke of how life would be in the new country, and the joy at being re-united with her relatives were dreams that I could not bear to shatter.

And so we came to Australia…

The jumbled incoherence of advertising billboards, the laboured deciphering of bus timetables, the cacophony of foreign sounds, the confusion when people spoke to me and I couldn't answer. These things would bring me to tears with frustration.

From the moment we stepped off the plane in Sydney, I was suddenly propelled into a realm I had never encountered before — I was "illiterate." I had heard that Australia was a multicultural country and yet everything was in English. Somehow I had expected that multicultural equated to multilingual, and although I was not so naïve to believe that Polish would be commonly used here, I was disappointed to find that the scant knowledge I had of German was of little use. To our embarrassment, my mother and I could only shrug when asked questions at the Customs gate, and were reduced to approaching a desk clerk and pointing at our tickets to try and find out where we should go to catch the ongoing flight to Canberra. The signs made no sense to us at all.

In Poland I had never struggled with language. Polish and Russian were, in fact, the two subjects I was most passionate about at school. I read widely in both and even wrote poetry in my mother tongue, albeit only for my own eyes.

Despite rationalising in my own mind that I could not be stupid, as I had mastered two other languages already, perhaps it was this very fact that caused me to feel so acutely the illiteracy that had suddenly been thrust upon me as an adult.

For several weeks after we arrived, I was content to stay cocooned in the safety of my relatives' Polish-speaking household, too intimidated to confront the English world outside on my own. Though we were keen to explore our new surroundings, when it came to situations that might require us to read, write or speak in English, my mother always made sure one of our relatives was accompanying us. And they were happy to oblige, so overjoyed at my mother having joined them in Australia that they would do anything to make the transition easier for her.

Their kindness was unintentional cruelty. After the twelve years we have now been here, my mother is still barely able to greet people in English, let alone read the mail she receives nor fill out forms when the necessity arises. She no longer has the independence to behave exactly as she chooses, one of the very dreams upon which her decision to emigrate was based. But perhaps, most painful of all for me to observe, is that she misses

out on many of the things that others take for granted, the little threads that are woven into the everyday fabric of our lives and enrich us. The intimacy of local neighbourhood gossip, the instant amusement at hearing a funny joke or reading a cartoon strip or seeing an ambiguously written sign. She misses out on being able to discuss the latest film, doesn't always pick up on the gravity or hilarity behind the pictures on television. She cannot read the book that everyone else is raving about.

When I ask her if she's happy that we came here, she always smiles and says how proud she is of what I have achieved and that for her, being among family is the most important thing.

For me, there was a realisation after several weeks of inertia that completing the university degree in psychology which I had begun in Poland was not a fait accompli. How on earth would I manage to get accepted into university in Australia, let alone cope with the demands of reading complex texts and writing essays in a language with which, at age 20, I was yet to begin grappling? And yet, how could I walk away and not even try to achieve my long-held ambition?

The thought of shaming my mother, but even more so the memory of my father who had always wished the best for me, spurred me into action. I asked my cousin to enrol me in the beginners' English course available to migrants, but vowed it would be the last time I asked her to do something for me. From here on her help would be in the form of practising the language I might need for certain situations, or explaining the nuances of words with similar meanings. Otherwise, I decided, it was up to me to start from scratch.

They were humble beginnings, but a big yellow bird and a strange angry creature in a rubbish bin became my daily companions in those first few months after arriving in Australia. They taught me the alphabet, and then how to string these symbols together to form words, and then how to use these new words in sentences. OK! Well, I had got to Sesame Street — now where to after that?

Once I started searching, I found that there was help available. All I had to do was ask. Intensive English courses at the TAFE colleges, volunteer tutor schemes organised by government-funded multicultural centres, ad-hoc courses run by local libraries and community organisations. Sometimes the level was too advanced, sometimes too easy. Sometimes the focus was not what I needed, but my own focus was what was the most important.

The following year I felt confident enough to study at a mainstream school and, to my great joy, completed Year 12 with a score that enabled me to enter university and begin the psychology degree I had fixed my sights on, for the second time. The rest, as they say, is history.

Now, as I look at my four year old son sitting on his grandmother's knee, poring over a picture book, chanting the alphabet song, 'A, B, C, D, E, F, G. H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O, P. Q, R, S, T, U, V. W, X, Y and Zee. Now I know my ABC, next time won't you sing with me?' I remember my old friend, Big Bird, and all that he taught me. And I sing at the top of my voice.

'I'm desperate for a job. I got put offf my last one at a tile warehouse because I couldn't write out the customer orders. Can you tell me where I can get some help?'

Female caller to the Reading Writing Hotline, aged 28, Bunbury WA 11 June 2003

LIVING AND LEARNING by Bernard Butler

I am Bernard Butler, aged 58 years old. I never had much education when I was younger and I had to leave school to help on the family farm at Eskdale.

When I was fourteen I had to work on other farms in the area. I was making one pound per week to help the family make ends meet. I worked in several places for years, at sawmills and butter factories to help get the family on their feet.

Then when I was 24 I got married and my wife Joyce was very supportive to me. Joyce would help me with any paper work to do with the farm. We worked together on the farm and on other places until 1975. I nearly broke my back and couldn't work. Several years after I felt a little bit better and I decided to get out and do some voluntary work.

I wanted to learn to be a sports trainer so I went to Wodonga TAFE in 1996 to learn. I told the teacher at the time that I couldn't read or write so I I had to do an oral test. I nearly failed but I persevered and I passed the test. The sports teacher talked me into going back to TAFE to learn to read and write so I decided to do something about my education. In 1997 I went back to TAFE to learn and I have been there for the last five years.

I really wanted to feel better about myself. I enrolled in Brush up Skills at Wodonga TAFE. This course I enjoyed and I wanted to do more. I learnt the basics and I could read and write a little bit but I wanted to keep going. I learnt how to add and take away. I also learnt how there were 1000 meters to a kilometer. When I got a few things correct I felt good so I wanted to do a lot more. Two years later I managed to get Certificate I in General Education for Adults. I still wanted to keep going so I started to do Certificate II.

Most of the people were much younger than I am and some of them were very willing to help me as they were a lot quicker than I at maths. The teachers were very helpful to me when I didn't understand what some things meant. My teachers have been very good to me over the years as I was the oldest in the class. I went on to learn to read and write and do real maths. I have teachers to thank for what I have achieved and I thank them with all my heart. I am also very grateful to my wife who has supported and encouraged me to keep going and achieve more.

In the Certificate II course I was asked to have a go at giving a talk to the class so I have now given talks each year — on first aid, how to grow proteas, marijuana and uses of eucalyptus. This year I am preparing a talk on Ned Kelly and his history. Because I did these talks in class I had a little more confidence and I spoke at my son's 21st birthday. Twelve months after that my wife and I got remarried and I spoke at the wedding.

In July 2002 I was asked to go to Melbourne in November to help out in Sports Medicine Australia at the World Masters Games. I helped out for eight days and I received a gold medal and a certificate. In the same year, in December, my mother had two strokes. I now need to look after my wife who is a diabetic. I leave the night English class about halfway through and go down stairs to the car park to give her an injection.

Some nights I feel the trip to class is long. We travel in from Eskdale every Monday night to Wodonga and it takes us an hour each way. My wife goes to see friends while I attend class.

I was afraid to use the computer in 1999 but I was encouraged to try and I found I could manage it. Now I enjoy playing games on the computer and I do all my final copies of my work that I need to take to TAFE. I can also now read papers, which I couldn't do before. I can also write a letter if I have to. I can also find things in the phone book, as I need them.

I am very proud of what I have achieved and I reckon I could go on a fair bit further. I used to feel ashamed that I couldn't read or write — now it doesn't bother me because I can get by. I feel very confident in what I do. I feel free to go out in public and speak.

A newspaper reporter interviewed me in the street last week. I was asked what I thought about the Ned Kelly exhibition as he comes from around this area. I felt very confident giving my views as I had done some research on him for my talk on Ned. A mug shot and my comments appeared in the local paper. I felt good!

INADEQUATE by Lauren Burdon

Silence. But it's not just an ordinary silence, like a lapse in conversation. Oh no, it's a heavy silence. An expectant silence. The quick intense burst of my insides constricting and the thudding of my heart begins. Instinctively I put my hand to my chest. I can feel each beat clearly and as clichéd as it sounds I have the fleeting thought that everyone else must be able to see it.

My hands have started to sweat and I rub them along my jeans. I clear my throat and look up into the eyes of ten other people. My friends.

All of this has taken no more than 30 seconds but I can accurately chart each and every phase. I've grown used to this feeling.

They are all still watching me. I turn to the person on my right and with as much jocularity as I can muster say "C'mon Simon. It's your go." It doesn't come out right though. My voice catches. Sounds croaky like it hasn't been used in years and in that split second I'm overflowing with hatred and contempt for myself.

Still there is silence. My girlfriend, Louise, leans over and whispers to me that it's okay for me to read. There are no hard words. "I just can't do it. I'm sorry," I whisper back and I can see the frustration in her eyes.

They don't understand really. I know they try to and I'm really grateful for that but unless it is something that inflicts you, you never really know what it feels like.

Simon's clear deep voice rings out and all attention switches from me to him. Something else I'm grateful for. I look around the room. At the polished floorboards. The glass-topped table we are all sitting around. The stainless steel shelves that are normally found in garages holding car parts and cleaning products and tools. In this case though they house small china figures and the many textbooks collected by Sarah during the three years of her nursing degree.

My gaze settles on the air-conditioner in the corner. The warm air it's blowing has started to make me sleepy. More than that though, the humming blocks out the noise of Simon reading. Blocks out the noise of his superiority over me. The sound of the superiority of all those present.

Perhaps what makes me feel worse is that the rest of them finished school. Some even went on to uni. I didn't. I dropped out. In year 10. To become a mechanic. I have my year 10 certificate but that doesn't count for much these days. Not to mention that most mechanics are dumped with the stigma of being uneducated. Illiterate.

The only person I feel comfortable confiding in is Louise. She tries so hard to help me. If we are reading together she helps me when I get stuck. She doesn't laugh at me or make me feel stupid when I stumble over words or mispronounce them. She's really good at not talking down to me too.

Once she asked me to read to her. She got into bed and pulled the blankets right up to her chin and stared at me with her green, green eyes. I lay down beside her and read to her in the soft lamplight. I don't think I've ever felt so comfortable.

I'm lucky to have someone like Louise who doesn't think that not being able to read very well puts me below her. Somehow makes me less than her. Still, even with someone like Louise to help me and to share with, there is something explicitly isolating about not being able to read. Something that sets us apart from others who take it for granted. Something that makes us feel so alone.

So inadequate.

STICKS AND STONES AND DOGS AND BONES by Kathryn Barker

Harry is a man's best friend. Vu Chang is that man. They've been together since Vu was 12. That's almost a century, in dog years.

In the beginning Vu had to go to school during the day. That meant Harry would be shut behind a big red fence in a small brown yard with nothing but a plastic yellow water bowl. He hated it. Harry could tell that Vu hated school too, because almost every day he came home crying. When that happened, Harry would try to cheer him up as best he could. Things like licking Vu's tickly feet or trying to balance on his back paws (but then falling down) seemed to work best.

The happiest times of Harry's life were when Vu started wagging classes. As soon as his aunt left for work, Vu would appear out of no-where and they'd escape for the day together. Their best adventures were always at the park in the city, back when "strangers" had been Harry's favourite kind of people. Those strangers walked out of their way to pat him, and sometimes left the most wonderful stuff behind. Like the green Frisbee. That had been his treasure until it got squashed underneath a white Volvo.

But playing hooky with Vu in the park was years ago now, and Harry has stopped liking strangers. They didn't pat him at all these days, even if he tried to look playful. Harry suspects Vu has gone off strangers too, because he won't ask them for help anymore, not under any circumstances. Of course, Vu's dislike of strangers might have something to do with the nasty names they sometimes called him. Whenever Harry hears that happen (which might not be all the time, because his hearing's getting worse) he barks as loud as he can and threatens to attack. He never does attack though, because Vu always walks (head down) in another direction, holding the leash extra tight. Harry is secretly relieved about that, because the kids that taunt always look viscous and travel in packs.

Now that Vu isn't a "kid" anymore, life has changed for Harry too. For example, instead of the park, he walks Vu to work every day. It's a long walk, and when they get there Harry has to stay tied up outside until Vu is ready for lunch. After they've eaten Harry usually has a nap to build up his strength for the long walk home. Most of the time people don't even notice him lying there, but occasionally they stroll past and say something about him being a "lazy mutt". Harry tries to ignore it.

Walking home from work used to be uneventful too, but lately something strange has been happening. Instead of taking their well-worn route, Vu has been steering them right through the train station. To anyone watching it might have looked like Vu was simply taking a short-cut, or maybe waiting for a friend. Harry knows better though, and suspects something is going on. They have even started train watching on Saturdays.

Today is their fourth Saturday in a row at the train station, and Vu has started biting his knuckles. That means he's nervous. After what seems like hours (and far too much biting), Vu finally walks over to a huge ticket machine that's covered in red and green symbols. Now Harry understands what Vu is up to, and wags his tail to show he approves. They've never caught a train before. It's exciting. Thinking of how sore his paws have been getting, he hopes they catch trains always from now on. Vu must be thinking the same thing, because he's already got some change out of his pocket to feed the strange contraption.

But something goes wrong.

For no reason (or none that Harry can see) Vu suddenly puts his hand back in his pocket and moves away from the machine quickly. Vu is agitated, so they walk around while he calms down. Harry decides he doesn't understand after all, but is glad when Vu finally stops to sit on a bench (his paws, hurting again).

The bench is right next to a long queue of people, and Vu immediately starts watching them. One by one the people are handing money to a blonde haired man in return for a ticket. Vu is scanning the crowd carefully, but Harry doesn't know what he's looking for so he can't help. Eventually, after some secret selection process is complete, Vu walks across to a nice looking grey-haired lady.

"Excuse me" says Vu, barely above a whisper "How much are the tickets?"

"The prices are on the counter window, dear" says the lady, smiling and pointing to the ticket booth. There's a long pause. Harry thinks Vu is going to say something else, but he doesn't.

Back at the bench, Vu pulls a sandwich from his coat pocket. He picks at the crust slowly, pretending not to watch the line of people shuffling towards the ticket booth. After about half an hour Vu gives Harry the ham from the middle, and gets up to put the buttered bread in the bin. But then, instead of sitting back on the bench, Vu surreptitiously joins the queue and signals for Harry to join him. Harry runs over immediately, careful not to step on the leash dragging behind him. Vu must be really nervous now; his biting had spread all the way to his fingertips. Harry, on the other hand, is ecstatic; they're really doing it!

After about 10 minutes (over an hour in dog time) they finally reach the front of the queue. Harry is below the counter so he can't see what's happening, but he can hear Vu and the blonde haired ticket man talking.

"Where to?"

"The city."

"Which line?"

"Um. The one that comes soonest?"

"$2.80 (pause). Got anything smaller than a 20?"

"Sorry."

"There's your change and a timetable. Next train's number 12, leaves from platform 3 in 10 minutes."

"Um…"

"Yeah?"

"Nothing. Thanks"

Vu takes Harry back to a different bench, and continues watching trains. Each train arrives, waits, then leaves again for some exciting new destination. Lots and lots of trains "leave again" while they sit on the bench, watching. After a while, Harry realises that one of them must have been number 12.

Harry's disappointed, but he can see that Vu's upset. It's not fun anymore, seeing his best friend like this, and he wants to go home. As if on cue, Vu gets up and they walk towards the gate. Harry thinks they're about to leave, but then Vu suddenly stops and kneels down beside him so they can touch, nose to snout (their special thing).

"We can do this" Vu whispers, but he doesn't sound confident. Harry isn't confident anymore either, but he's not going to show it. Instead, he pushes his big wet nose into Vu's ear ("I love you").

With that, Vu starts walking towards the open doors of the nearest train. Harry is right by his side. It's terrifying, certainly, but exhilarating too. Vu is concentrating so hard that, even with his bad hearing, Harry is first to notice the shouting. He tries to look around and see where it's coming from, but Vu is walking so quickly with the lead in his hand, that it's difficult for Harry to turn his head and keep up at the same time.

"Hey you—stop! Hey, can't you read!" yells an overweight guard, lumbering towards them. That gets Vu's attention. He stops, hesitates, then panics and jumps onto the train with Harry just as the doors are closing.

Harry waits for their getaway, but the train doesn't budge. Even worse, they're surrounded by strangers, possibly the bad kind. Everyone is staring at Vu, and at him, and none of them are smiling. Vu looks terrified, and crouches down next to Harry, pulling him close. Harry desperately wants to make Vu feel better (his tickly feet perhaps?) but there isn't time. Just like magic the doors suddenly open, and Vu (plus Harry) are pulled from the train.

In a horrible mess of movement, a bald guard appears out of nowhere and yanks the leash from Vu's tight grip. Harry panics. He barks and barks then tries to bite, but the guard kicks him hard to shut him up. Harry suspects his jaw is broken, but he doesn't care; the big guard is taking Vu away! Harry digs his claws into the concrete, determined not to move, but it doesn't quite work. He's being stolen, one screeching inch at a time.

Harry watches helplessly as Vu is grabbed by the jaw, and forced to look at a big red sign instead of him. Just before Harry is dragged around a final corner, he sees the guard that's holding Vu point angrily at the sign. Then, loud enough for everyone to hear, the guard yells "NO DOGS ALLOWED ON TRAINS!"

Adult literacy class, Zegie Island, Ethiopia (photo: UNESCO/D. Roger)

Literacy student, Lao People's Democratic Republic (photo: UNESCO/A. Gillette)

Can literacy help you escape?

Discard the hook and read a book. Become an armchair fisherman where you can pick up a fishing book which can take you anywhere in the world — barramundi from Cape York, salmon from Alaska, carp from Gumbeen Lake. A literate person does not have to be cold, wet, muddy or have to kill to enjoy the excitement of fishing.

from the Condobolin Great Literacy Debate

Does literacy enhance life?

Man does not live by fish alone. The difference between us and the beasts is that lofty feeling of enthusiasm about more than just survival. And while the Negative Team will probably try and tell you that without these little fish swimming around we're all going to die and none of us is going to survive, in fact literacy is the new survival skill of the 2000s, because if you are literate all the things that you do in a primitive society to survive, will in fact be enhanced.

from the Illawarra Great Literacy Debate

Is literacy history?

It's not just this modern day and age that you'll find it better to be literate than to be able to fish. It's been the truth for most of recorded history, in fact without literacy there would be no recorded history.

from the Illawarra Great Literacy Debate

[Jesus] didn't need fishermen to help him with his cause. He could supply his own bread and fish to feed the multitudes… What Jesus needed around him were good and literate men who could record his words, write them down for prosperity.

from the Illawarra Great Literacy Debate

Parthenon was built with stone and with mathematics. And mathematics is a branch of literacy. The Parthenon was not built out of fish.

from the Kiama Great Literacy Debate

'I've spent my life avoiding any situation which requires me to write something for someone else to see. I can't go on like this.'

Female caller to the Reading Writing Hotline, 45, Albury NSW, 1 May 2003

Is literacy the key to a code?

The ability to read and write is the ability to communicate using a code. An illiterate person is someone who cannot read the code. That could be either because they do not know the code or they are incapable of reading the code because of mental or physical problems. Most of these problems can be overcome. People can learn to read and write. Blind people can read a different code to sighted people, because it has been translated to Braille. People with dyslexia have been helped to read by changing the colour of the background paper and the colour of the ink. The ability to learn the codes takes time and effort so can't be done overnight. But you can be considered illiterate overnight.

from the Flexible Learning Framework online forum

Is literacy the foundation of civilisation?

Literacy enables us to understand and interpret from the past, and through this we work towards advancements for the future. Literacy is cumulative in nature. We build and build upon it to achieve great things... Literacy is the trunk of the tree. It is the foundation and advancements such as health sciences are merely the branches.

from the Strathfield Great Literacy Debate

Adult literacy students, Barcelona, Spain (photo: UNESCO/A. Jonquires)

I'm 86. In today's 'Australian' there is an article about a 92-year old man who's just finished his PhD. I'd love to be able to write and spell better and maybe it isn't too late.

Male caller to the Reading Writing Hotline, Blue Mountains, NSW
5 November 2002

Information & Communications Technology (ICT) and People with an Intellectual Disability

These notes have been stimulated by research conducted by Belinda Deakin and undertaken under the auspices of the ALA–ANTA Innovation Grant 2003. The grant is available to ALA members to allow them to undertake action research into their field of practice, and to share the results of their work with others working in the field. Adult Learning Australia gratefully acknowledges the funding support provided by the Australian National Training Authority to undertake research activities.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has the capacity to allow people with an intellectual disability greater independent engagement with the world, either passively through viewing documents or watching movies, or pro-actively through creating word documents, through email, online chatting and by engaging in online banking and shopping.

The anonymity that computer-based communication affords is a great leveller, allowing people from all walks of life to communicate on a more equal footing without superficial characteristics presenting barriers to initiating engagement. The ability to communicate without some of the pressures of spontaneous verbal communication is of considerable appeal to many people with an intellectual disability.

In many cases, computer technology has made learning more accessible to people with disabilities, allowing them to work at their own pace and receive information in a range of formats.

However, there are barriers to the use of computer technology by people with intellectual disability. Some of the barriers to using technology as a communications or independent learning tool are:

Literacy levels: While many computer environments are visually or aurally-based, the majority of computer applications require, at the very least, basic literacy.

Using the internet to obtain information requires an even greater level of literacy as not only is accurate spelling required to fully use a search engine, but reasonably sophisticated levels of information literacy are needed to determine what words to use to initiate the search as well as to determine what content is valuable and what is not.

In addition to basic literacy and skills in information literacy, effective computer use requires specialized computer literacy.

For example, the icons used in computer environments are not always immediately understood and have to be learnt. What happens to a word document when the scrolling function is used, or the viewing scale is changed, are also aspects of computer usage that require a specific set of 'reading' skills. Many intellectually disabled people do not have the cognitive ability to learn these rather abstract concepts quickly or easily.

Physical ability: While voice-command technology does exist, keyboarding is still the most common mode of accessing a computer. Many people with an intellectual disability do not have the fine motor skills or coordination required to use a keyboard to ensure accurate results.

For people who are not able to learn the QWERTY keyboard and have to rely upon 'two finger' typing, using the computer can be a slow and frustrating process, exacerbating any slowness caused by the disability.

Attitudinal: Fear of using computers, computer programs and other technology can be, for some, as significant an impediment as physical or financial barriers.

Access: While it may be assumed that many people with intellectual disability have access to computers in their homes, especially those living with their families, many often only have access to computers in public spaces. Some people with intellectual disability find using computers in a public space uncomfortable, costly or difficult to access on a regular basis, diminishing significantly the benefits that may be derived from the technology. Indeed, Ms Deakin's survey work would indicate that having access to a computer at home has a very positive impact on ICT skills acquired by people with a disability.

Hardware set up and support: While most computer users are unable to correct complex programs, they are able to perform basic checks or undertake simple tasks (such as re-booting the computer) to determine the nature of the problem and explore a possible solution. Many people with an intellectual disability are unable to perform these simple checking and problem solving processes.

Often a problem that occurs when using a computer will be something external, such as the internet 'going down' or an email bouncing back from someone else's computer. The process required to identify these problems and, if necessary, to engage external help to check or rectify them may be difficult for a person with an intellectual disability. The cognitive processes required to work through problems, the language skills required to articulate the problems, and the ability to understand moderately technical instructions can all present barriers.

From the overview of the potential and barriers of ICT, several questions arise:

- How much access do people with an intellectual disability have to computers?
- How much focus is there in giving people with intellectual disability sufficient literacy (including basic, information and ICT literacy) skills so that they can effectively use computer technology as an independent communication and self-directed learning tool?
- Given the large number of computer programs available to assist people with intellectual disability with literacy and numeracy development to what extent are these being used by the organisations offering services to people with an intellectual disability?
- How well resourced are computer helplines, computer retailers, internet service providers and online learning providers to interact effectively with people with an intellectual disability?
- In cases in which the person with the intellectual disability requires assistance to use a computer, what impact does this have on the person's ability to use the computer and explore content in a way they wish to?

Is literacy universal?

Literacy itself — no matter what languages and knowledge are involved — is not a universal concept, and is usually very European.

from the Flexible Learning Framework online forum

Is literacy more important than defence?

I am not blaming you for my ignorance, but I will blame you if you intend to keep it this way. We want and deserve a second chance as a member of this community... I would like to ask would you employ someone who is not able to follow some simple basic instructions? If the answer is no then the final answer is yes we do need more education. We need to spend more money on books not weapons.

An adult literacy student speaking at the Randwick forum

Why do you need literacy?

I didn't do any of this study to get a job, or to get better pay, I did all of this study for myself and my family, to tell myself I could be educated, to feel good about myself, to know that I was starting to like me, and that I was accountable for how I felt about myself. No more excuses or negative self talk.

from the Logan discussion forum

Tasmanian ALA Outstanding Program Award 2003 winner — The Phoenix Literacy and Numeracy Program

The Phoenix Literacy and Numeracy Program (run through the King Island Supporting Disabilities Working Group) encourages clients with mild intellectual disabilities to re-assess their ability to learn. An individual program is planned for each student covering basic literacy, numeracy, and life skills.

The program has opened the door for a number of people, creating an awareness of their abilities and ways to interact and support each other. The clients range in age from 22 to 70 years. Some live independently and others with their families. The increased skills and self confidence they have gained have given them a better quality of life and has led to an enthusiastic and happy group of people who are now looking to move into supported employment.

Canadian adult literacy expert, Professor Allan Quigley, speaking at an Adult Learners' Week function in Adelaide (Photo: SA DFEEST)

Does literacy let you take part in life?

I'm not sure that it is better to be literate than to fish but if I am not literate I can't contribute to this dialogue.

from the Tasmanian online discussion

The ability to read and write is the ability to take part in the great conversation as some famous writer once said. The conversation is out there. It's in the libraries, in this beautiful library, it's in the bookshops and the newsagents and it's on the roads — it's everywhere. And if you can't read and write you're not taking part in it.

from the Hume Great Literacy Debate

Is literacy a survival skill?

In today's world we need to be critical consumers… Because I'm literate I can make a conscious decision to just push that rubbish aside. I don't need any of it, and that's why we need to be literate… Literacy is a survival skill of this era.

from the Kiama Great Literacy Debate

We're social beings. We live in a situation where we depend on one another… So today we have to be good and associate with one another and work together as a group, and therefore we need to be able to read and write. We need to be efficient, we need to be flexible in our approaches, we need to be able to turn our hand to many tools and many pursuits. And reading makes that possible.

from the Illawarra Great Literacy Debate

'I recently tried to help my nine-year-old son with his homework. It came back to him covered in the teacher's red pen. He was so embarrassed and it was all my fault. I just broke down. My son doesn't know I can't read or write properly'.

Female caller to the Reading Writing Hotline 23 April 2003

So, are you literate?

What is literacy? Is it created by context? Why is it important? Is it the cornerstone of democracy? Is it better to be literate than to know how to fish? Who should help adults become literate?

For many people literacy means the ability to read and write. But increasingly an ability to 'read' between the lines, to understand systems, to gather and use accurate information, to understand complex financial terminology, to read images… have become part of what it means to be literate. Does this suggest that, as forms of communication evolve and the areas in which we have to be knowledgeable change, there is the possibility that we may all potentially, one day, find ourselves illiterate? In this fast world can one be literate for life?

In our society literacy is intimately connected with the enrichment of life, material advancement and often social status. It is a key to self-esteem and social participation. For some, literacy is seen as the survival skill of the modern world. It has created the world in which we live.

Yet, it is estimated that around 45 per cent of the Australian adult population do not have sufficient levels of literacy to cope with the everyday demands of life and work in our complex society. What is the personal and social cost of this? A British study, *Learning to be Healthy*, found that 36 per cent of women with very low literacy skills suffered from depression compared with seven per cent of women with good literacy skills.

Many of us would agree that to be literate is as valuable as having a roof over our heads and being able to eat. There is no doubt that the more literate a person the more opportunities they are likely to have. Direct links can be drawn between levels of literacy and levels of potential income. Participation in our social structures, or the ability to challenge the status quo, are equally enabled by literacy ability.

If we agree that literacy is important for individual and social wellbeing, whose responsibility is it to ensure that people are given the opportunity to develop their literacy skills? If literacy is more than reading and writing, whose responsibility is it to ensure that people develop ability in each new literacy that emerges?

The decade 2003–2012 is the United Nations Literacy Decade. In many countries the focus of this decade will be on providing basic literacy education for all, especially for those who have not had the opportunity to develop literacy skills: often the poor, people in rural or excluded ethnic communities, and in many countries women. We, in Australia, also need to focus on providing opportunities for all to develop adequate — or better than adequate — levels of literacy and numeracy.

One in five Australian adults do not have fundamental literacy skills. In other words around 20 per cent of Australian adults perform at the lowest of the internationally recognised literacy benchmarks. This means they have difficulty with basic reading and arithmetic.

Currently, Australia has no national policy on adult literacy and numeracy. Adult literacy is addressed in a piecemeal fashion, often through vocational training and programs for newly arrived migrants or through State-based programs. According to the Australian Council of Adult Literacy (ACAL) this means that it is difficult to develop a clear picture of a nationally cohesive response to adult literacy problems, including the important issue of professional development of adult literacy providers.

This is not somebody else's problem; it impacts on us all. During the Literacy Decade and beyond, we need to debate the issues around literacy and challenge each other to come up with solutions to the problems we identify. We need to remind our governments that, while ensuring solid literacy skills among the young is important, adults too need opportunities to develop, maintain and evolve their literacy skills.

Literacy should be viewed not just in terms of employment and productivity, but in terms of basic human rights. Although levels of literacy and potential for employment are linked, adult literacy is not simply a training competency. It is an essential life skill, a survival mechanism for the modern age.

The last time Australia had a clear national policy on adult literacy was in 1991. It is time to develop a new national policy for the new century. This policy should represent a whole-of-government effort because levels of adult literacy impact upon the whole of our society, on the health, dynamism, productivity and cohesion of our nation.

To be effective any national approach to adult literacy needs to be couched in terms of a broader policy on adult learning, one that recognises the value of all forms of learning taking place within the Australian community, not just the accredited, formal or vocational.

The successful implementation of a new national policy on adult literacy will require a commitment by the government to increase funding and resourcing for a range of adult learning providers.

We need to challenge our representatives in government to express their strategies for supporting adult learning and adult literacy.

With commitment and a concerted effort, with public discussion of the issues and their consequences, Australia can, over the next ten years, develop and implement adult learning strategies that will see Australia become a world leader in terms of levels of adult literacy.

When, at the end of the United Nations Literacy Decade, another literacy scrapbook is prepared, let us hope that many of the policy issues raised in this book will have been satisfactorily addressed. By then there may be new challenges for us to address. But, perhaps, by then, there will be a national adult literacy policy in place to ensure new challenges can be met swiftly, with innovation and adequate ongoing resources.

How do we value alternative literacies?

Goethe wrote: 'Our mistakes and failures are always the first to strike us, and outweigh in our imagination what we have accomplished and attained'. This is unfortunately very relevant to people who don't see themselves as having very high 'traditional' literacy skills. The things they are able to achieve are often far more impressive because of their capacity to develop alternative literacies. I agree we should be able to celebrate these: How would we describe them?

from the Flexible Learning Framework online forum

'Australia not the place it used to be. When I come here, plenty job you don't need to read write nothing. But now, what can I do? I too old do hard job. I'm strong in the mind but not the body.'

Male caller to the Reading Writing Hotline, aged 53, Geelong VIC, 5 June 2003

ACT Adult Learners' Week 2003 Outstanding Provider Award Winner — Learning Options Program, Access Education, Canberra Institute of Technology

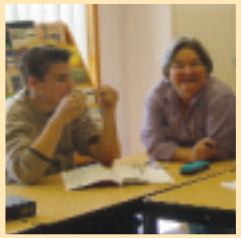

Photo: Helene Weston-Davy

Access Education at CIT offers people a second chance at learning within an adult learning environment. In addition to providing learning in small, relaxed and friendly groups for both people in the community and in work, programs are also available for people with specific needs.

The Learning Options program at CIT is the first step for many people toward further education and training. Learners use the program as the starting point on their pathway to vocational training, employment, Year 10 or Year 12, pre-tertiary programs or to involvement in community or work-related activities.

Learning Options provides literacy and numeracy-based programs that are tailored to individual learner needs. The learner chooses the skills they need to build on. In Learning Options students can choose to work on skills in: literacy, numeracy, computing, internet use, independent learning, study skills, problem solving, communication, vocational training, preparing for work or preparing for education.

Some government funded programs

The Reading Writing Hotline 1300 6 555 06

Funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training and managed by the TAFE NSW Access Division since 1994, The Reading Writing Hotline is a national telephone adult literacy referral service.

More than 95,000 calls have been received over the life of the service and over 1200 educational providers are listed on the Hotline's national database. Hotline statistics show that:

- Three in five callers are male
- 55% of all callers are employed
- 45% of calls come from Regional Australia
- 84% of callers are seeking help for the first time
- 50% completed year 9 or less
- 16% are from non-English speaking backgrounds

Workplace English Language and Literacy

The Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) program is an Australian Government program which provides funding for up to three years to enterprises or training providers to provide workers with English language and literacy skills to help them meet their current and future employment and training needs. Training is undertaken in the workplace and is integrated with other workplace or vocational training. The program is run by the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training.

Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program

Funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training, the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program provides language, literacy and numeracy training for eligible job seekers whose skills are below the level considered necessary to secure sustainable employment or pursue further education and training. It is designed to help remove a major barrier to employment and improve participants daily lives.

The Basic IT Enabling Skills (BITES) for Older Workers Program

The BITES program provides workers aged 45 years and older with the opportunity to undergo nationally accredited training in information technology. The program is designed to help older welfare-dependent people, who are in the labour force, to gain nationally accredited skills in information and communication technology, so they can operate more effectively in the workforce. The program is available to people who are 45 years and over, in receipt of income support, in the labour force (i.e. currently in work or looking for work), and who have no post-high school IT qualification. BITES is funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training.

Adult Migrant English Program

The Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) provides up to 510 hours of basic English language tuition to migrants and refugees from non-English speaking backgrounds. Up to an additional 100 hours is also available to refugees and humanitarian entrants through the Special Preparatory Program.

The program is provided by the Australian Government Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) to help newly-arrived migrants and refugees settle successfully in Australia. Around six million hours of adult English language tuition are provided each year from an annual budget of approximately $100 million.

State and Territory adult literacy provision

States and Territories use a percentage of their Vocational Education and Training (VET) recurrent funding and their own contribution to run language, literacy and numeracy programs within their communities or fund special initiatives that support essential skills development.

Do you want more?

The following organisations and webpages may offer you more information and ideas about adult literacy.

Adult Learning and Documentation Information Network (ALADIN) literacy materials: http://www.unesco.org/education/aladin/literacy.html

Adult Literacy and Numeracy Australian Research Consortium: http://www.staff.vu.edu.au/alnarc/index.html

Antidote — campaign for emotional literacy: http://www.antidote.org.uk/

ANZ Survey of adult financial literacy in Australia: http://www.anz.com/aus/aboutanz/community/Programs/finlit.asp

Adult Numeracy in Australia: http://aris.com.au/numeracy/index.html

Adult Migrant English Program: http://www.immi.gov.au/amep/index.htm

Australian Council for Adult Literacy: http://www.acal.edu.au/

Australian Library and Information Association's Information Literacy Kit (PDF 382kB): http://www.alia.org.au/advocacy/literacy.kit.pdf

Finding a world of information: http://www.bnp.tafe.net/infoworld/index.htm

Health Literacy Month: http://www.healthliteracymonth.com/

Improving financial literacy: http://www.asic.gov.au/fido/fido.nsf/byheadline/Financial+literacy?openDocument
(Australian Securities and Investments Commission)

International Adult Literacy Survey: http://www.nald.ca/nls/ials/ialsreps/ialsrpt2/ials2/high1e.htm

LILI — the Learn Information Literacy Initiative: http://www.tafe.sa.edu.au/lili/index.html

Literacy Exchange — world resources on literacy: http://www.literacyexchange.net/

LiteracyNet: http://www.dest.gov.au/literacynet/

Literacy.org : http://www.dest.gov.au/literacynet/

Queensland Council for Adult Literacy: http://cwpp.slq.qld.gov.au/qcal/

Read Write Now — Improving adult literacy in the West Australian community: http://www.read-write-now.org/

Reading Writing Hotline: http://www.literacyline.edu.au/

South Australian Council for Adult Literacy: http://www.acal.edu.au/sacal/

United Nations Literacy Decade: http://portal.unesco.org/education/ev.php?URL_ID=5000&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201

Victorian Adult Literacy and Basic Education Council: http://valbec.org.au/

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The Great Literacy Debates quoted in this report were held during Adult Learners' Week 2003.

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- Milligan House, Bunbury, WA
- Southbank Institute of TAFE, Morningside Campus, Brisbane, QLD
- Hume Global Learning Centre, Broadmeadows, Vic
- Condobolin Adult Education Inc, Condobolin, NSW
- Southern Cross University, Gold Coast, QLD
- Gympie Learning Centre, Gympie, QLD
- Horsham Learning Town, Horsham, Vic
- Kiama Community Centre City, Kiama, NSW
- Rotary Club, Logan Sunrise, Logan, QLD
- Community Learning Pathways Inc., Mackay, QLD
- Morrison House, Mt Evelyn, Vic
- Flexible Learning Network, http://learnscope.flexiblelearning.net.au/LearnScope/home.asp.
- Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA), http://www.alia.org.au/
- Nhulunbuy Training Centre, Nhulunbuy, NT
- Department of Education & Training, Perth, WA
- Adult Basic Education, Randwick TAFE, Randwick, NSW
- Strathfield Regional Community College, Strathfield, NSW
- Tasmanian Department of Education, http://forum.discover.tased.edu.au/webforum/education/
- Illawarra & South East Literacy Taskforce, Wollongong, NSW

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