

“The Parthenon was not built out of fish”

A synopsis of the Adult Learners' Week 2003 Great Literacy Debates
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The Great Literacy Debate, Hume Global Learning Centre, 2003

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Adult Learners' Week



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OVERVIEW

The Great Literacy Debates 2003

To mark the commencement of United Nations Literacy Decade, Adult Learners' Week 2003 adopted adult literacy as a national campaign focus. One of the key activities for this focus was the Great Literacy Debate project. Around 20 'debates' are known to have taken place around Australia around the beginning of September 2003. (See the Appendix 1)

Most of the debates took the form of a traditional three-person a side 'for' and 'against' competition. Some took the form of a panel discussion, while others were presented as an online discussion.

Three topics were proposed for the Great Literacy Debate and many of the debates were centred around 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

Each topics touched both upon the definition of literacy and also its relative importance. Of the three, the last topic was the most popular.

Some of the events presented under the banner of the 'Great Literacy Debate' focused on a different topic. One, for example, debated the proposition 'that literacy is the greatest contribution to civilisation'. Other 'Great Literacy Debate' activities were free flowing discussion forums around the broad topic of adult literacy. In these forums, the issue of how to define literacy and its relative importance came to the fore along with discussion about practical matters concerning the facilitation and funding of literacy education.

Notes about the synopsis and the transcripts

Organisers of the known Great Literacy Debate activities were sent a cassette tape and were asked to record their activity for later transcription. Some of the event organisers obliged. Of those that were recorded a few of the tapes were inaudible, but a handful were clear enough to transcribe. Of the 20 or so known Great Literacy Debate activities, this report draws from the transcripts of 10 of them:

Debates:

- Condobolin Adult Education, NSW
- Hume Global Learning Centre, Vic
- Illawarra and South East Literacy 2003 Taskforce, NSW
- Kiama Community College, NSW
- Strathfield Regional Community College, NSW
- Southbank TAFE, Morningside campus, QLD

Forums:

- Adult Basic Education, Randwick TAFE, NSW
- Rotary Club of Logan Sunrise, QLD

Online discussions:

- Australian Flexible Learning Framework
- Tasmanian Education Forum

This synopsis contained in this report identifies key and recurring themes. It draws upon all of the transcripts. The transcripts of the live debates should be viewed with some caution, however, for the comments were made in the context of entertainment and of a 'game'. The nature of live debating means that there is often little time for deep reflection as speakers are forced to think on their feet. The views expressed may not represent those truly held by the speakers. Moreover in many cases, it is reasonable to assume that the arguments and claims put forward were as a result of a team effort rather than an individual's own work. For this reason, quotes that appear in this synopsis have not been attributed to individuals but to the debates in which they were expressed. It is also for this reason that the full transcripts of the debates have not been made public.

Despite being presented in the context of entertainment, the way that literacy was spoken about - what it was claimed to be or not to be - is of interest. So too are the discussions around the relative value of literacy, if for no other reason than to stimulate our own thoughts about the nature and value of literacy. Is literacy more than reading and writing? Is literacy synonymous with education? Is there a link between literacy and wealth? Does literacy stand in opposition to nature? Has literacy enhanced or destroyed our culture?

The transcripts, along with this synopsis, have been lodged with the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) archives to assist them with their work on adult literacy. It is intended that the synopsis and the transcripts will offer an insight into some aspects of community approaches to the topic of 'adult literacy' in 2003.

To assist in the development of the debates, 'cheat sheets' were prepared by Adult Learning Australia and distributed, as part of the Great Literacy Debate Kit, to many of the event organisers. Separate sheets were prepared for Affirmative and Negative teams. In each sheet four or five basic arguments were presented along with some ideas about how to define the topic and structure the debate. The Great Literacy Debate Kit is available from the Adult Learners' Week website – <http://www.adultlearnersweek.org> – or else from Adult Learning Australia.

It is not clear if the material contained within the Great Literacy Debate Kit was distributed to – or used by - all of the speakers cited here. Many of the arguments presented in the debates did not appear in the cheat sheets and so have come from the speakers themselves. These arguments can be revealing especially when the same line of thinking appears in a number of different debates. The cheat sheets did not offer examples in support of the arguments so those cited here are also the speakers' own.

THE SYNOPSIS

What is literacy?

The 'cheat sheets' encouraged debaters to establish early on in the debate a clear definition of literacy, one "that the average person 'in the street' might accept". Teams from both sides were furnished with the Australian Council for Adult Literacy description of 'being literate':

It means being able to participate as a citizen in a democracy, understanding and fulfilling one's role, being able to assess one's needs, having one's say and responding to the views and actions of others by engaging in the range of literacy/communication practices required in the public domain.

It means operating effectively in one's workplace, participating confidently in its routines and practices, interacting appropriately with others according to workplace roles and relationships, reading, writing and speaking the many different types of texts generated within that particular field of work and accurately employing its particular use of language (discourse).

If there is no workplace it means being able to effectively use a broad range of literacy and communication practices in order to successfully negotiate the job market, and community services and their associated bureaucracies. (Source: <http://www.acal.edu.au/faq.shtml>)

Some of the debaters promoted this definition. Indeed, in Condobolin they presented it almost verbatim. In Strathfield they spoke of literacy as being far more than just reading and writing:

Just because someone is able to read and write does not mean that they are literate. Literacy is indeed an umbrella term, and under this umbrella fall different literacies, whereby literacy can include the ability to infer from a given situation and a set of information.

In the Hume debate they talked of literate citizens “reading the world as well as the word, speaking out and speaking up”. In this debate they also spoke of literacy as being “the whole of your life”:

It’s not just reading and writing at school. 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.

Also from the Hume debate: “Literacy is the ability to inquire about the world, to access information, to share ideas and to speak up”; and “Literacy is also about having an element of confidence to interpret information, to read the meaning of words and of character. Literacy transforms lives and transforms communities.”

In a similar vein, a contributor to the Tasmanian online discussion argued that, “literacy is, in its most basic form how we understand and make sense of the world, giving us means by which we can attain flexibility and adapt to the changes that are inevitable”.

Literacy was not only seen by many participants as a way of coping with inevitable change, many went a step further to conclude that inevitable change in turn creates new literacies. The Flexible Learning online discussion – which was overtly a definitional debate because it was looking at the role of context in defining literacy – contained the following observations on this theme:

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.

Personally, I still struggle with ‘C U 2 NITE’ as a demonstration of literacy skills, but I know that this is an indication of the limits of my own frame of reference, rather than a reflection on SMS as a valid form of literacy.

The view that literacy is defined by majority use was espoused by another participant in the Flexible Learning online discussion:

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.

It was also noted in this online discussion that the changing definitions of relevant literacy had an impact on government policy:

If the government thinks that there is a one-off bill for making the population of the country literate they will have to think again. Literacy is a skill that has to be practiced and updated as methods of communication and the language changes.

A comment in the Tasmanian online debate not only supported the concept of multiple literacies but also implied that the way in which we talk about literacy is inadequate:

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?

These 'other' literacies were discussed in many of the fishing debates. A debater in the Southbank debate talked about how illiterate fishermen could steer boats without the help of satellite technology or find bait, how they could 'read' the ocean and the weather.

While many of the participants defined literacy in terms of a broad and changing social tool or code, many of the debaters, even those espousing the flexible contextual definition, seemed to return to reading and writing as 'true' literacy. Throughout the transcripts references are made to reading, writing and literature.

In Strathfield they talked about the chaos in a society that exists without literacy, "without the capacity to read letters and words". In the Southbank debate, a speaker arguing in favour of literacy over fishing said that he was going to take the audience to a world of "26 magical letters, magical letters that jump across the page."

John Gates, a Welsh contributor to the Flexible Learning debate who had himself undertaken literacy education as an adult, wrote of literacy in terms of a reading and writing 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 take time and effort so can't be done overnight. But you can be considered illiterate overnight.

An interesting twist on the idea that 'literacy' equates to reading and writing was its link to literature and, in particular, 'high-brow' literature. A speaker in the Illawarra debate introduced himself by declaring a "vested interest ... in today's topic. I make my living as ... a writer... I am able to survive, literally, because I am literate".

In Condobolin, one of the speakers arguing ‘against’ literacy in favour of fishing recounted a story to illustrate the irrelevancy of literacy by talking about how obscure he found James Joyce’s *Ulysses*: “I read the first page and a half....*Ulysses* was a shocker”.

The notion that literacy means high-brow literature also appeared in the Southbank debate despite the first speaker in this debate making it clear that he, at least, was not “talking about scientists” but that he was:

talking about the common man, the tradesmen, the seventeen-year-old checkout chick down the road that’s just had her second kid to two different drivers. I’m talking about truck drivers, taxi drivers, ambulance drivers...and even the lowest of the low – politicians.

In some of the debates literacy was taken to be interchangeable with education, to be literate was taken to mean ‘educated’. This was stated plainly in the Illawarra debate: “literacy is not a mere part of education, it is what education is all about”. In the Southbank debate a speaker claimed that he was “not literary enough to know exactly how many years ago that the printing press came into being”.

In the Strathfield debate there was talk of literacy giving us:

the knowledge ... that [things such as meteors] are coming towards us and thus it is literacy that enables us to put into place preventative measures and the like. Thus, it is an example of literacy actually being the greatest as it unlocks the door. It opens our eyes to all these other things.

While not a clear definition of literacy *per se*, a comment from the Randwick forum provides yet another dimension of literacy, claiming literacy to be a ‘movement’:

Literacy is not a problem. It’s a movement, something that people all around Sydney, all around New South Wales, all around the world are involved in, so I hope people feel strong and proud to be part of that.

What is the value of literacy?

In addition to the overt claims about what literacy is (or is not), the arguments around the value of literacy also give a sense of how people define literacy.

The value of literacy was explored in two ways. The first by comparing its importance with that of something else. In the ‘fishing’ topic, for example, literacy was pitted against the simple natural life or else fundamental survival skills. In the ‘democracy’ topic, literacy was weighed against other key aspects of democracy, such as passion and oral tradition.

The second way in which the value of literacy was judged was by imagining a world or individual without literacy or by exploring what happened or would happen when literacy was removed from or introduced to a society or an individual.

From the discussions, several common themes emerged as to the role, value and impact of literacy:

Literacy can make you rich

The idea that literacy is a pathway to increased earning potential was made explicit in the Southbank debate. Prosperity and literacy also emerged in the Condobolin debate with one speaker talking about the 'literate people' on his team and in the audience as being well presented and prosperous. Later in the debate it was claimed that a Condobolin entrepreneur – who runs a manure company – “now makes millions” as a “result of his high level of literacy”.

In the Kiama debate a speaker pointed out that “it is not necessary to be literate. You can pay somebody to do your writing for you.” This speaker went on to talk about his grandfather who was a magistrate in Orange, and who earned his living writing letters for people, which would again seem to suggest that literacy is indeed viewed a potential money earner.

However the pathway between literacy and wealth was not always seen as clear cut. A twist on the money and literacy theme was presented in the Illawarra debate in a tale about an Italian migrant who had insufficient reading and writing ability to fill in the application forms for a council job as a garbage man. Taking the small amount of money he had, he bought some fish from the local market and sold it at a profit. Such was his skill in selling he eventually ended up a wealthy man. When it was revealed that he couldn't read or write someone said to him, “Think where you could have been in life if you had been able to read and write”. “Yes”, he said, “I'd be out driving the garbage truck back at the Fairfield City Council!”.

Similarly, a participant in the Flexible Learning discussion argued that:

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

In the Southbank debate another sort of wealth was proposed, the wealth of 'illiterates', the wealth that comes from understanding nature:

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 featured in all sorts of literate knowledge and in the world of theory and books...You can read a million fishing magazines and still not learn a damn thing.

Literacy can enrich

The potential for literacy or, rather, reading books, to help escape the mundane was proposed in several of the debates. In Condobolin a speaker suggested that the audience:

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 Gum Bend Lake. A literate person does not have to be cold, wet, muddy or have to kill to enjoy the excitement of fishing.

In a similar vein, Gary Lyon, footballer turned author, explained in a pre-debate talk given at the Hume event how “one of the most important things ... and most exciting things I did was to be able to learn to read.” He continued:

And what you find if you do pick it up and you get excited about it, it opens up so many doors for you. I mean we all are a little bit excluded from doing some of the things we want to do because of time and because of money

and because we can't perhaps travel everywhere we'd like to do, or do the things that we all dream about, but nothing can stop you from picking up a book and losing yourself in the book. And it can take you to all sorts of places and you can experience all sorts of wonderful opportunities simply by being able to pick up a book.

But the enriching power of books was not seen as being limited to armchair travel. The power of the word to make everyday life more palatable was also promoted as an argument in favour of literacy, as is evident in this example from the Illawarra debate:

Without literacy fishing would just be a service industry. It would be all about foods, sport, recreation and having a good time. Instead literacy has allowed us to make fishing an intimate, intricate, not to say compelling component of our every day lives. Because of literacy fishing makes its way through our popular and our high culture from *Moby Dick* to the *Old Man of the Sea* from Homer Simpson's fantasies to those cute little fake stuffed fish that you can buy on a plaque and that sing 'Don't worry, be happy' at the flick of a button.

In a similar vein a speaker in the Kiama debate claimed that:

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 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 if you're literate 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.

Literacy as the key to civilisation

Literacy and its role in creating civilisation was discussed in a number of the debates. A key contribution made by literacy to civilisation was its role in creating history and facilitating the sharing of knowledge – transferring wisdom or warning of mistakes – across the generations. As pointed out in the Illawarra debate:

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.

A similar claim was made in Strathfield:

If we think of it from a historical standpoint, we've asked ourselves without literacy how would we know anything about the ancient world? Aristotle, Plato and Cicero and their philosophies would be lost, would be lost to the world had not their learning been written down and understood... Because of the discovery of the ancient world in the areas of philosophy, science, astronomy ... that were all written in books, civilization was then available to draw on prior knowledge.

The Strathfield debaters saw the importance of literacy for civilisation not just in terms of recording the past but also in creating the future:

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.

In Kiama a debater pointed out how central literacy had been to civilisation, more than simply recording its achievements or allowing an appreciation of it, literacy was the foundation upon which civilisation was built:

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

Literacy and the end of the world

As previously indicated, the Great Literacy Debate was something of a game and therefore it is hard to determine the strength of conviction behind the speakers' arguments. One of the recurring strategies employed to refute the benefits of literacy was to suggest that literacy had brought about our failed world. While the negative 'fish' cheat sheet had suggested an argument that fishing is a perfect escape from the stresses of modern life and a valuable survival skill, the notes did not suggest, as some of the debaters did, that literacy was the destructive force from which fishing was an escape.

While many debaters argued that literacy created history and civilization, others presented the opposite argument that literacy had, in fact, destroyed culture: "I would like to say that what writing is doing is destroying storytellers. You don't hear storytellers any more". (from the Illawarra debate)

In Condobolin one of the debaters talked about how a dramatic change in human history resulting in people becoming smaller and sicker coincided with the introduction of "two of mankind's greatest follies". The speaker continues:

The first was growing wheat and the second was learning to read and write. Reading and writing was associated with the rise of civilisation. The first problem was with the Assyrians both growing wheat and learning to read and write and led to governments, hierarchies, armies, bureaucracy suppressions and slavery for many people.

From the Illawarra debate:

We're teaching the Third World and the literate First World to read and write and to be computer literate. We must also encourage them to keep on fishing. Take away their knowledge of fishing and you can nearly destroy a whole race of people – something that happened to indigenous Australians.

From the Southbank debate:

Now, 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 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 and as the unspoken word? I don't think so.

In a similar vein a speaker in the Kiama debate lamented the loss of the illiterate stonemason, claiming that a measure of illiteracy in society did, in fact, have its benefits:

Since the industrial revolution people of genius have risen through literacy up through the ranks. If you look at the great achievements of Europe stonemasons moved up and became architects. Twenty generations ago he was probably a stonemason of genius. He built the great cathedrals of Europe, he built the great buildings, because he was locked into his illiterate station in life. I'm not sure that illiteracy isn't a bad thing because it spreads greatness from one end of society to the other end of society. If you have got literacy as your great over-arching name, everybody is aspiring to it, and nobody wants to stay down there producing these great works of genius. I can say quite seriously, 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?' And isn't that 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 man a hundred years ago?

Some of the speakers asked where literacy was leading us. These quotes are from the Condobolin debate:

Now, is it more important to be able to read or to eat? Is it better to be able to produce your own food or to collect your own food, or cut down trees to make more books? Where is literacy leading us?

The more literacy, the knowledge we have or we attain, the more we want. People want more education. They want to be educated and this in turn leads to the development of technologies. These things cost money, and the need for money gives rise to the profit making. The exploitation of natural resources. And we all know where this is leading us. Pollution, degradation of environment from over-use of resources, over-population and eventually, as is happening in the Middle East at the moment, mankind is starting to fight over space and land and limited resources, [leading] ominously in the near future to a World War III – all humankind destroying itself. Mmmm. This is where the attainment of knowledge is leading us. We should go back to fishing.

While some debaters suggested that literacy was the cause of our current ills, others proposed literacy as the only solution. A debater in Kiama argued that:

it is important that we learn to read so that we can follow the changes that we're bringing to the world, and that way, if we do learn to read... there may be some fishing for our children in the future.

Others went further still, suggesting that literacy was the one thing keeping us from chaos. This from Strathfield:

Consider what our lives would be like without literacy... Putting it simply, we would have anarchy, and we would have services in areas where they are not needed. We would have the breakdown of communication barriers because of an inability to execute and understand oral literacy. And most importantly we would have a political system where our politicians would not understand and act upon the needs of the people.

And this from the Southbank debate: "Without literacy, without words and numbers, without reading or writing the world would not function".

Literacy as the key to social participation

The role that literacy plays in facilitating participation in society was central to many of the debates. Indeed, as was pointed out in the Tasmanian online debate, literacy allowed the debaters themselves to contribute to the discussions: “I’m not sure that it better to be literate than to fish but if I am not literate I can’t contribute to this dialogue”.

This observation was echoed in the Hume debate:

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.

More than simply participating in a conversation, the role that literacy plays in empowering the individual to shape the form of their interaction with the world came to the fore in the Kiama debate:

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.

In a similar spirit a member of the NSW State parliament speaking at the Randwick forum argued that:

if people are unable to read, write, [and acquire] basic numeracy skills – and quite frankly basic computer skills – then democracy as we know it will collapse. It’s the easiest thing in the world to maintain a dictatorial structure, a totalitarian structure, if your community is kept in the dark.

This comment was echoed by a subsequent speaker in the Randwick forum, an adult literacy student from a non-English speaking background:

It is very difficult when we come to another country that doesn’t understand your own needs, that you want to be a part of a democracy and to participate and not to be left out on the shelf. We want to belong. And if you don’t belong then you are an outsider, and as an outsider you can’t do much for anyone.

However, there was some scepticism expressed about the world to which literacy (or education) was the gateway. For example, from the Illawarra debate came this observation:

We think we’re sophisticated. We’ve got money, we’ve got power and we’re all right Jack... We’ve all heard that education is the only way out of the poverty trap, but when we take someone out of the poverty trap where do we put them? On a treadmill to follow everyone else around...

While some debaters promoted literacy as a tool for inclusion, a tool to facilitate participation, a few of those arguing ‘against’ literacy argued that literacy was in fact a tool used to actively exclude:

Is literacy the cornerstone of democracy? Well, no, it clearly isn't, because literacy is basically about what is written and what is read and who gets control over what is written and what is read, and who gets to have the major say in these modes. And today those kind of literacies are not used for creating equality. In fact those kinds of literacies, the reading and the writing and by whom and who gets the major say is basically used to create an unlevel playing field. (from the Hume debate)

And from the same debate:

In fact literacy can be trickery, and in the hands of our politicians it often does become trickery. For example, how many secret memos, how many fixed up statistics, how much small print is written in documents to confuse people to pull the wool over our heads.

Along the same theme it was claimed in the Kiama debate that:

Literacy is not the pure panacea for all our ills in this world. Our prisons are littered with literates, or supposed literates, who use their financial literacies and dangle imaginary prawns in front of innocent unsuspecting members of the public – Rene Rivkin I think is a very good example.

In the Strathfield debate a speaker reminded the audience that, “Literacy produced *Mein Kampf* – a great achievement for humanity!”.

In reply to this sort of argument, a Hume debater pointed out that while the “written word can be trickery... unless you are literate you won't be able to see through it, you won't be able to scrutinise and hold the government accountable”.

The role of literacy in creating either inclusion or exclusion led, in some debates, to aligning literacy with status and class. In the Southbank debate a speaker claimed literacy to be “un-Australian” because none of the really ‘Australian’ pursuits required skills in literacy. In presenting this argument she characterised the “literate world” as “highbrow, hoity-toity, highfalutin, plain unnecessary” and argued that you did not “need a champagne vocabulary to have a successful life”.

Similarly, but from the other side of the argument, in Condobolin, being literate was presented as a badge of status, an aspect of being ‘cultured’:

I am proud to give you my name because I consider myself a literate person. And I consider most of the audience tonight are very literate...Don't we look a million dollars tonight? Can I ask you how – well I won't point out names particularly, that's not the part of a literate person to do that, but we do consider the visual presentation does show confidence in our literary abilities.

In the Kiama debate, the chairperson remarked that “quite obviously if you're literate you are allowed to take the high moral ground”. A speaker in the same debate also picked up on the idea that literacy may in some people's minds be associated with snobbery and refuted the notion:

It's not elitist to say that you need to be literate. It's really, really practical and what's why we're saying to you tonight that it's much, much better to be literate than to be able to fish.

In the same debate another speaker noted that “literacy does not remove idiocy. You can still be literate and stupid. It's just that you are on a stupid or a slightly higher level.”

In many of the debates a reverse snobbery was evident, especially when the earthiness of fishing was contrasted with the excesses of literacy or, at least of education which, as has been highlighted earlier, was used interchangeably with the term literacy in some debates. A speaker in the Southbank debate talked about how over-education creates class warfare¹ and how, when he was young, he would skip school with his father's blessing because "he knew that I was learning how to look after myself and also developing the skills needed to feed the family."

In the Illawarra debate it was stated plainly that "some of the stupidest people I've ever met have been gainfully employed and prosperous and very well educated".

Literacy is irrelevant

An information sheet offered to debate organisers contained the IALS statistic that 46% of Australian adults do not have the literacy skills to enable them to cope in a sophisticated modern world. Instead of alarming the speakers this statistic was used by some as evidence for the irrelevancy of literacy. This, from the Condobolin debate:

Ladies and gentlemen... 46% 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 Flexible Learning discussion:

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'.

In a similar vein was the observation from the Strathfield debate that "the Aboriginals of Australia that survived for 60,000 years without literacy, they don't need it".

From the Flexible Learning Debate:

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.

In the Hume debate a similar point was made:

Years ago I spent several months in a New Guinea village and whenever there was a dispute the whole village came together face to face, looked each other in the eye and argued their case. There were no memos, there were no notes, there was no written document, there was no small print. All there was was people in an environment where they could speak up and speak out.

¹ This point is lost in an inaudible part of the tape but was noted by the author of this synopsis in his notes taken at the event.

The notion that literacy and 'book-learning' were irrelevant to the real meaning and pleasures of life was a recurring theme. It is evident here in this quote from the Kiama debate:

If you think about it literacy – this is being serious for a minute – is the product of the industrial revolution. Think back before the industrial revolution and say to yourself, what did mankind achieve before the industrial revolution? They built the pyramids, they fed themselves, they built roads... Most of it built by illiterate people.

From the Illawarra debate came this observation:

Literacy is a very modern phenomena. It was only held by a very small percentage of ancient societies. And in a lot of societies the person who was most esteemed was not the writer. It wasn't until 1450 – holy smoke – it wasn't until 1450 that we had printing.... And the vast majority of people couldn't read or write. I am sure my great-great-grandparents couldn't read and write, but they had a fairly happy life. They fed themselves and they procreated, which I am eternally grateful for. But they were able to do that. And just because you can't read doesn't mean to say that the important things of life – health, wealth and happiness – what is to say is that if you don't actually have those.

The following poem that questions the value of literacy over lived experience, also came from the Illawarra debate:

When the morning sun peeps over the mountains and the sea
And our hooks and lines are baited there's no place we'd rather be.
We're a part of this great nature, we haven't got a care.
Why do we want to read of life when we're living it – we're there!

In a similar vein are these claims from the Southbank debate:

I find it useful to read and write, but that does not give me a superiority complex. Other things give me a superiority complex but not the ability to read and write. You don't need to be literate to see things. You don't have to be literate to hear things. You don't have to be literate to experience things. I do not accept the definition of literacy is the capacity to interpret reality. Even then it is not an achievement of civilisation because civilisation arose after the capacity to interpret reality by any definition.

This view was not espoused by the few adult literacy students who spoke in some of the forums. As we have already seen, in Randwick one spoke of the power of literacy for the individual in terms of allowing them to participate fully in society. The impact of literacy on individual self-esteem was not as frequently discussed as might have been expected (but did feature significantly in the entries to the Adult Learners' Week 2003 writing competition). This benefit of literacy was addressed, however, through an eloquent presentation at the Logan forum.

An adult literacy student speaking at the Logan forum told of her feelings of anxiety and discomfort when talking to other mothers at her children's school and how her children had been picked upon because of their mothers' inability to read or write. She spoke of the tremendous boost to her esteem when she participated in the literacy classes: "There were people [there] that had faith in me! For the first time, I really felt good about myself". For her the value of literacy was not seen in terms of material wealth or civilisation but in terms of building self esteem:

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.

And, finally, from the Randwick forum came the statement: 'As a migrant I am half a person. Without literacy I'm invisible.'

Conclusions

The Great Literacy Debate was proposed as an activity through which to engage people in a discussion about the nature and importance of literacy and of literacy support especially for adults. While the debates were intended to be fun – Adult Learners' Week is a celebration of learning - and speakers therefore spoke with an eye to entertainment, the way they spoke about literacy, the arguments they developed to support their case, and the examples upon which they drew, provide some insight into how literacy is perceived in Australia today.

The transcripts reveal a prevailing view that, despite some acknowledgement of the multiple and flexible nature of literacy, to be literate is the fundamental ability to read and write.

For many literacy seems intimately connected with the enrichment of life, material advancement or social status. For some, it is synonymous with high brow literature and academic pursuit, and in this formulation literacy is not always seen as a good thing. Although presented in the spirit of the game, one cannot but help think that many of the speakers espousing the pleasures, simplicity or fundamental necessity of natural pursuits such as fishing in preference to literacy (or at least literary pursuits) were speaking from the heart. This may be another manifestation of Australia's fabled anti-intellectualism in favour of embracing physical activity. If so, it highlights the need for celebrations such as Adult Learners' Week to promote the true nature and value of intellectual pursuit and, in particular, the importance of literacy in adult life.

APPENDIX 1: Known Adult Learners' Week 2003 Great Literacy Debate events

The following is a list of debates and discussions held during Adult Learners' Week 2003 with a focus on adult literacy. Most were branded as being part of The Great Literacy Debate.

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