

Literacy in the community education sector

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The community-based adult education sector is a significant and important provider of adult literacy education in Australia. Adult and Community Education (ACE) centres can be found in communities across Australia ranging from large metropolitan providers such as the Workers Educational Associations (WEAs) and community colleges, through medium-sized centres in regional cities, to small rural and metropolitan centres and neighbourhood houses.

According to the latest enrolment statistics some 225 000 Australians enrolled in 1997 in a publicly funded ACE vocational (that is, accredited) program while a further 380 000 adults enrolled in a non-accredited ACE program. Of these nearly one in five are involved in courses under the broad multi-field category which includes literacy and numeracy.

ACE providers are involved in delivering accredited literacy courses especially in the areas of job skills, youth education and workplace training. In a number of cases the community centre is working with government departments or local business to deliver flexible education and training services designed to meet the needs of the student and the employer or government.

In addition there are many examples where literacy is a component of other programs. For example, a provider in a Victorian regional centre observed the high levels of car theft and youth unemployment and designed panel beating and motor maintenance programs targeted at young people in the area. Literacy and numeracy and

job seeking skills became important parts of those programs. It is this kind of flexibility that has resulted in ACE achieving high levels of success in its programs.

There are also examples among some community centres who have followed through with local outreach programs. In some of these cases volunteers provide literacy and English speaking courses to those in need who might have missed out on access to government funded programs.

In each of these examples the aim of the program is to treat literacy in a social context, whether it be around job-seeking skills, unemployment, youth issues, or immigration.

The 1997 ABS survey on Aspects of Literacy shows that:

- fourteen per cent of English speakers have literacy and numeracy difficulties, representing 1.5 million Australians;
- 15-19 year olds perform at higher literacy levels than older age groups; and
- about sixty per cent of the unemployed have very poor literacy and numeracy skills, and those that have been unemployed for two years or more are even more likely to have literacy and numeracy difficulties.

Other research has shown:

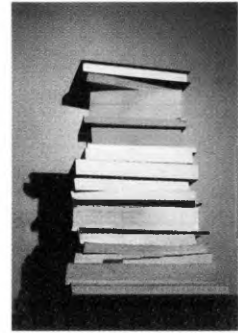
- where literacy and numeracy assistance has been provided there has been a positive effect on employment particularly for 16-24 year olds and on-the-job retention rates. (These figures provided by ACAL, the Australian Council for Adult Literacy).

Literacy is an expanding field incorporating not just reading and writing skills, but increasingly through other expressions of literacy such as information literacy, technological literacy and cultural literacy.

One of the key events of this year's Adult Learners Week (5-11 September) will be a focus on literacy. International Literacy Day falls in the middle of the Week (8 September). A number of state and local events are being arranged on this day and it offers a terrific opportunity for community and workplace educators and libraries to work together promoting the need for increased access to adult literacy and numeracy support for all adult Australians.

Another focus of Adult Learning Week will be on the emergence of 'learning cities' in Australia. Already the city of Wodonga has declared itself a learning city and a number of others are investigating how and when they might also become a learning city. A conference on 11-12 September in Wodonga will bring together people and organisations interested in knowing more about these developments. Certainly at the heart of any learning city will be centres such as community organisations and public libraries. It is a development that can only be welcomed.

More information about Adult Learners Week can be obtained from the Adult Learning Australia (ALA) national office on 02 6251 7933 or by visiting the website — alw.ala.asn.au ■



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