Critical reimagining – Adult literacy and numeracy practices for sustainable development conference, 4th-5th October 2019, University of Technology Sydney

There is a large body of people who require help to become functionally literate. This is needed so they can fully engage with their families, the community, government services and be effective and efficient in workplaces. Much of the funding for training in the Literacy space is geared towards skills for the workplace, and syllabuses are proscriptive. Research shows that the motivation for people to attempt to access literacy training is usually more personal than just to get/keep work. The driver for success with students is 'whatever the reason' they have been brave enough to admit they have a need to learn. Therefore set coursework is rarely relevant and so largely ineffectual. Student centred learning is needed. The prevailing wisdom was that literacy and numeracy training needs to be individualised to suit the student and therefore one on one training is ideal.

The United Nations Sustainable Development goal number 4 is;   
Education – Universal literacy is achieved by 2030 for all youth and a substantial proportion of all men and women.

This conference was aimed at supporting and equipping language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) teachers with tools and methods to teach, from the premise of literacy to fulfil the student needs rather than from the need for skills for employment goals.

Funding bodies over the past 10 years have increasing only been funding programs which restrict LLN learning to those skills which directly relate to workplace situations. They have also focussed on quantitative assessment of each module and the need to be competent in each module after a specific time frame and then moving on. Funding does not allow for repeating courses. Adult literacy is so much more than a tool for economic development.

The common thread through all the presentations was that when teaching is related to the need of the student this is when learning has meaning and therefore actually takes place.  Connecting with individuals is the key to LLN learning. Achieving literacy and numeracy not only has benefits for the students directly but also for their communities and the broader community as their understanding of issues related to sustainable practices also increases. What follows are the take home points I felt related to public libraries and our efforts to support adult literacy learners.

Ralf St Clair, Keynote speaker, pointed out that we know literacies are numerous and complex and tutors and teachers need to own the fact that all people have capabilities, people know stuff, that LLN students are very capable adults that are looking to expand their capabilities.

Dr Alison Abraham conducted research on what took place in classrooms. Essentially she found repeatedly that social interaction was required for learning to take place. That is, what is upper most in students thoughts needs to be dealt with/acknowledged and discussed (socio-cultural dimension) before the critical dimension (true understanding) can be reached. She purports that one can transform teaching practise by allowing the students to be human. Theory needs to compliment practice, not drive it.

Christl Doemling spoke of Adult Literacy classes at TAFE being of a 1 to 6 ratio in the 70’s now there are up to 20 students and can be higher. The model which has developed ‘competency based training’ is incompatible with ‘needs based provision’. The ‘lock step’ acquisition of course contend which underpins funding and current course delivery is not realistic for literacy learning. She applauded using volunteer tutors, who are well supported and have good co-ordination across the community, as they are needed to fill the gaps left by skills based training models.

Trainers and volunteers involved in the Literacy for Life campaign spoke. It is a program which trains volunteers from Aboriginal communities to work with their adult peers and even elders in the community. It is a whole family and storytelling approach which allows for two way learning and for community commitments to take precedence. The model removed the power structure from the ‘white’ trainers and gave it to the ‘educator’ in the community. When the program left the area, the educators are still there. Community members still come to those educators and the other participants in the program for help and guidance.

Amy Thomas spoke about the need to have indigenous education in the hands of the Indigenous communities and with bilingualism being a driving factor. It is necessary to make an equitable and sustainable future. It was interesting and relevant to a library setting in that we need to remember that the basis of learning to be literate in English is being literate in one’s first language.

Vanessa Iles spoke of the Reading Writing Hotline. They deal with 1500 literacy providers across Australia, 7% are libraries. Callers tell them it is hard to find courses, customer service of providers is hard to navigate; they feel ashamed, accreditation is not important, the enrolment process & assessment component of courses discourages their attendance. English speaking background people are too embarrassed to attend the same classes as NESB people. They want a non-threatening environment and content which is not specific for job seekers. One on one tutoring is ideal. Please inform them of any programs you run to which they may be able refer callers.

I found the passion of the participants inspiring along with their respect for students. LLN teachers are pushing boundaries, taking risks, with their proscribed coursework and competencies to provide learning experiences which are meaningful for their students. Trained volunteers tutors are seen as an essential part of LLN learning for those who do not fit the TAFE model, or who wish to continue to learn once they have completed the course. Public libraries who train and support volunteer tutors doing one-on-one work, are an essential part of the adult literacy and numeracy learning mix, supporting those who take the greatest risk, the person who asks for help.

Most papers from the conference are now available [online](http://www.nswalnc.org.au/ACALConference2019Program.htm).