



## TRANSCRIPT

Broadcast Monday 1 September 2008



### **A Learning Society Commentary - Adult Literacy in Australia Today**

**Dr Sue Shore**

Senior Lecturer

Centre for Studies in Literacy Policy and Learning Cultures

University of South Australia

The findings from the Australian *Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey* were produced through considerable work between the Australian Bureau of Statistics, international education and testing agencies, Australian government departments and many consultants. A lot of people think this survey is simply about telling us how many people can't read or write. On the contrary the survey data was collected in parallel with 2006 Australian census data. In Australia the age range covered those people between 15 and 74 and collection processes were quite complex.

The survey also provides us with rough measures of the difficulty of literacy and numeracy tasks. So for example people commonly talk about 5 levels of difficulty, 1 through 5, with Level 5 referring to the most difficult kinds of tasks people might be asked to complete. Generally we also talk about Level 3 as being the level needed to operate fairly well on a day to day basis. If we want to use the data to argue for better conditions for literacy provision it's worthwhile having some background knowledge about the survey.

The data tell us about the ways in which young people and adults 'do things'. We can draw connections between previous levels of education and how people read and find information in forms. We can also look at whether people have undertaken a recent course, or their accredited qualifications and comparative literacy and numeracy skills. We can make some links between literacy and numeracy ability and median wages. The survey data tells us for example that low levels of literacy, for example people who operate at Levels 1 and 2 where tasks aren't all that difficult, might be expected to have lower median wages than people with more advanced skills, those who operate at level 4 and 5 for example.

In general the testing framework has been adopted by a number of countries around the world and the generic language used in many reports is collapsed to 'skill development'. And this is where the Australian education and training sector has much to learn from experienced literacy and numeracy educators.

They know that literacy and numeracy are not things you download for life while in school. But if we don't make use of those skills, like any routines or habits, we lose them. Getting back in the literacy and numeracy habit needs to be seen as a really important step in an education and training framework. Now this might look quite different for people operating at different levels of skill development. We can understand that people with poor skills may have trouble. But people who seem quite competent on the surface often experience some trouble with literacy and numeracy. Often this happens if they experience an unexpected event: unemployment, death of a partner or relative, divorce, movement of children to a new school. All of these things interrupt the familiar support systems people often have in place.

For women these changes may even be planned, for example through periods of childbirth and extended family responsibilities. But they are no less challenging, as habits and priorities change during these periods of care. Contrary to popular opinion, literacy testing and benchmarking in schools is not going to address

the challenges these adults face. They are already long gone from school and often operating well in the labour force or community, until the change hits.

The survey also tells us that these people, who might appear to have no difficulties, are often troubled by changes in technology, especially at work or in dealing with government departments and businesses. Skilled literacy and numeracy educators know how to work in industry and with other trainers to negotiate these changes. They have knowledge of the transferable rules of language and calculations across social and economic situations. They know how documents organise information in specific contexts. They understand the connections between language, literacy and the different genres employers, government and community agencies use to request or demand payments and communicate with the public. This is exactly what makes them specialist literacy educators.

Just as the typewriter and printing press changed our practices so, too, do things like mobile phones, and digital environments.

Just about every Australian workplace involves communication with other people, with documents, indeed even with machines. The survey data tells us that workplaces in particular will need progressive strategies in place to ensure that highly competent workers and employers, those of us operating at level 3 and above, can keep abreast of the changes.

Rolling out the survey results in Australia presents many challenges. It's easy to concentrate on the lower end of the continuum. It's easy to buy in to the myth that people with low levels of literacy cause many of Australia's productivity problems. And of course people with poor and low level skills should have the right to solid and sustained training opportunities. But I think our responses need to be broader than this.

At a very minimum we need to interrupt the talk which continually defines people with poor literacy skills as if they are always lazy or disinterested in further training. We need to understand the difference between short term training that might refresh habits and when we need to offer more long term and sustained education and training programs. We need to pay particular attention to those whose employment, wage and promotion prospects are poor precisely because their training or work environments cannot accommodate the time they need to finetune their literacy and numeracy habit.

I confess also that I am sometimes confounded by the trends in the professional development and employment culture associated with adult literacy and the VET sector. I simply don't understand how a field so central to Australia's productivity, for that's the way it is positioned in many policy statements, can be so woefully understaffed. In many Australian states we find short term contracts, a casualised teaching workforce, and tender arrangements which offer very few sustainable and ongoing professional development opportunities for the educators. These conditions provide few incentives for people to pursue qualifications beyond Advanced Diploma level. Educators and trainers do not always see it as a productive field in which to build a career.

Recognition of prior learning complicates these arrangements. It smooths the way for granting qualifications, but it doesn't necessarily ensure that educators are exposed to new developments. Nor does it challenge them to learn new pedagogies, that is, new ways of engaging with their learners.

If literacy and numeracy are central to skills development for national productivity and social cohesion we need a more robust debate about what counts as professional standards for literacy and numeracy educators.

We also need to encourage stronger debate about the extent to which learning pathways connect to actual outcomes for learners.

In very few other areas of social life would we accept such a generalist approach to something which is, ostensibly, so important for the country.