



# Literate Australia

A MONOGRAPH

Professor Rosemary Ross Johnston  
University of Technology Sydney



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# INTRODUCTION

## 1 UTS CENTRE FOR CHILD AND YOUTH: CULTURE AND WELLBEING

### i THE CENTRE

The UTS Centre for Child and Youth: Culture and Wellbeing is an innovative interdisciplinary 21st century model that integrates technology, research, teaching and practice in all fields pertaining to the culture and well being of children and youth – including education, health, sport, family and community.

The Centre carries out research, through funded grants and community sponsorship; uses such research to inform teaching and disseminate knowledge in specialised areas pertaining to children and youth; and develops and tracks applications in professional and community practice.

The interdisciplinary approach of the UTS Centre for Child and Youth acknowledges the holistic nature of the factors that influence the lives and culture of children and young people. Education, sport, health, family, and community are not neat, discrete terms; health and family are likely to have an influence in all areas, and culture is conceptualised in its broadest sense.

The Centre is likely to consider community issues such as: literacy and school education; indigenous education; educating children in remote areas; sedentary childhoods and obesity; the effects of video games; child care and its effects on young children; the sexualisation of children; primary school curricula; bullying; parenting practices; drugs and alcohol abuse; healthy lifestyles for sports participation; youth suicide; the proposed national curriculum; books, films, music, magazines and advertising; play and playground spaces; work and workplaces (increasing numbers of high school students hold part time jobs); personal relationships, *Facebook*, *MySpace* and the technological environment of adolescents' online/digital/mobile cultures.

The work of the Centre will benefit the wider community through its conceptual commitment not only to researching best practice in a range of child and youth related areas, but also to teaching and disseminating such practice as *next practice*. It will facilitate external engagement in a wide range of areas pertaining to children, and will make a positive contribution to debate, to ethical practices, and to well-formulated policy and policy making.

The vision of the Centre may be expressed in metaphorical terms as a brain: acquiring new knowledge, connecting and streaming it through its neural networks, reflecting it in its nested assembly, tuning and filtering the knowledge it acquires into intelligent action.

## ii ADVISORY BOARD

### **Amanda Bell**

Dr Amanda Bell is the Principal of Brisbane Girls Grammar School and is committed to the idea of wellbeing in education. Her professional background lies in art history and education, with wide experience in teaching and administration of schools in New South Wales, Western Australia and Queensland. Bell also has curatorial experience, developed during her Directorship of the National Trust's S.H. Ervin Gallery in Sydney. She was appointed as a Trustee of the Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA) in 2008.

### **Peter Browne**

Adjunct Professor Peter Browne is ex-Director General of Education in Western Australia, was appointed Adjunct Professor at Curtin University in August 2001 and continued in that role before moving to BHP Billiton Iron Ore (BHPBIO) as Education Consultant in 2005. Peter now consults exclusively to BHPBIO managing company/community education and health partnerships worth over \$12 million dollars.

### **David Gallop**

David Gallop was appointed Chief Executive Officer of the National Rugby League in February 2002. Having previously acted as the NRL's Director of Legal and Business Affairs, he has been closely involved in all key decisions involving the game since the NRL's inception in 1997. David is also a member of the Australian Rugby League and ARL Development Boards and is Secretary of the Rugby League International Federation. In 2006 he was voted the Australian Sports Administrator of the Year at the Confederation of Australian Sport Awards. In 2008, David was appointed to the Board of the Australian Sports Commission. The ASC plays a vital role in working with national sporting organisations and the sporting industry to enable Australia to maintain its competitive edge internationally.

### **David Hannaford**

David Hannaford is General Manager, Tresillian Family Care Centres NSW.

### **Cherrell Hirst**

Dr Cherrell Hirst, AO, FTSE, commenced her career as a medical doctor where she gained a national reputation in the field of breast cancer screening and diagnosis as Director of the Wesley Breast Clinic (1984-2001). Commitment to the value of education took her to the Council of the Queensland University of Technology where she served as Chancellor from 1994 to 2004. Through her combined interests in cancer, science and research, she has been a director of a number of companies, has served on government grants committees and not-for-profit Boards, and is now a part time CEO of a venture fund in Biotech. For this work she was elected to the Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering. In recognition of her work in the fields of breast cancer and education, Dr Hirst has been awarded three honorary doctorates, a Centenary Medal in 2003 and the title of Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) in 1998. She was Queenslander of the Year in 1995.

**Neil Jackson**

Neil Jackson is the Director Education, Microsoft Australia.

**Vicki Jack**

Vicki Jack is Director of Schools in the Pilbara Education District, Department of Education and Training, WA.

**Ken A. Jolly**

Ken Jolly AM, FAIM, is the Chairman of Scholastic Australia. His lifelong interest in education stems from his early career as a teacher in Victoria, and a short time with the Victorian Teachers' Union as a research officer. He became Managing Director in 1980 at a time when literacy was a key concern in Australia. Some of his greatest achievements include promoting the books of all publishers through ASO, Book Clubs and Book Fairs, the development of Dromkeen and its priceless collection of children's literature and the establishment of the Book Bunker at the New Children's Hospital, Westmead. In 1995 he was appointed Chairman of Central Coast Campus Board; in 1996 he launched the Australian Children's Book Council Awards Foundation. In 1997 Ken was appointed a member of a steering committee to investigate further higher education provision on the Central Coast of NSW. In 2005 he was made a Member of the Order of Australia.

**Mike McCluskey**

Mike McCluskey is NSW State Director of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Mike has been a committee or board member for a number of community and not for profit organisations including community TV, regional arts, adult education, disability services and childcare. He has delivered broadcast and journalism training in Bhutan and PNG. He has worked on a variety of projects for the ABC including industrial agreements, performance management systems and corporate responsibility initiatives. He has reported on and led broadcast teams covering emergencies across the country. His current role includes community liaison to ensure the ABC's objectives are meeting community and audience needs and interests across the state.

**James Morrison**

James Morrison AM is trumpeter and musician of international renown, and a mentor of young people and youth bands.

**Leon Paroissien**

Adjunct Professor Leon Paroissien AM was Founding Director of the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council, Founding Director of Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art, and Founding Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei, Taiwan. He has been editor of Australian Art Review, Art and Australia, and Visual Arts and Culture: An International Journal of Contemporary Art. Early in his career Leon Paroissien was a lecturer in Art History and Art Education in Victoria and Tasmania, after teaching Art, Craft and English in secondary schools in Victoria and in England.

### **Gregor Ramsey**

Professor Gregor Ramsey AM is Chair of the National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership. He was responsible for the merger of six colleges of advanced education, which are now part of the University of South Australia, and has held several senior Commonwealth positions in education and training, including Chair of the Higher Education Council and culminating in his appointment as chair of the National Board of Employment, Education and Training. In 1991 he became managing director of the New South Wales TAFE Commission. In November 2000 he completed a review of teacher education in New South Wales: Quality Matters – Revitalising Teaching: Critical Times, Critical Choices. In 2003 he led a team reviewing secondary education in the Northern Territory and was project director to establish the Desert Peoples Centre in Alice Springs. He has recently completed a due diligence report on teaching and learning at the University of Melbourne.

### **Paolo Totaro**

Paolo Totaro AM (for services to the arts and the community), Dottore in Giurisprudenza (Università Federico II, Naples), has a distinguished career as a musician, poet, writer and columnist, TV presenter/producer, executive member of numerous arts and community organisations, including Foundation Director, Australia Council's Community Arts Board; Foundation Chairman, Ethnic Affairs Commission of NSW (1976-1989); Commissioner, Australian Law Reform Commission; Member, Constitutional Commission Democratic Rights Committee; Board of Vocational Education and Training (BVET); Member, Vocational Education Training and Accreditation Board (VETAB); Member, Northern Sydney Area Health Board; Member, Sydney Olympic Park Advisory Committee; Chairman, Living Values Education Association of Australia. Former Member of Council and Pro Chancellor of the UTS.

### **Theo van Leeuwen**

Professor Theo van Leeuwen worked as a film and television producer, scriptwriter and director in his native Holland and in Australia. He has worked at Macquarie University, the University of the Arts (London), and Cardiff University, and has lectured in many other universities throughout the world. He is now Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at UTS. He has written many books and articles on discourse analysis, visual communication and multimodality.

### iii MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

The UTS Centre for Child and Youth: Culture and Wellbeing is a UTS Centre for Enterprise, Research and Community.

#### **Director**

Professor Rosemary Johnston

#### **External Representative and Member of the Advisory Board**

Dr Paolo Totaro

#### **Ex Officio**

Professor Theo van Leeuwen (Dean of Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences)

Professor John Daly (Dean of Faculty of Nursing, Midwifery and Health)

#### **Associate Directors**

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##### **Research**

Dr Kitty te Riele (Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences)

##### **Community**

Professor Cathrine Fowler (Faculty of Nursing, Midwifery and Health)

#### **Management Committee**

Dr Janet Currie (Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences)

Dr Daniel Chandran (Faculty of Engineering and IT)

Dr Greg Martin (Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences)

#### iv ASSOCIATES

**Peter Aubusson** is Associate Professor and Head Teacher Education Programs at UTS.

**Larissa Behrendt** is Professor of Law and Director of Research at the Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning at UTS.

**Carolyn Briggs** is Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Nursing, Midwifery and Health, with research interests in family health and well children.

**John Buchanan** is a Senior Lecturer at UTS whose main research interests include social justice and intercultural education.

**Nina Burridge** is Senior Lecturer at UTS and has a longstanding interest in Human Rights.

**Daniel Chandran** is Senior Lecturer in the School of Systems, Management and Leadership, Faculty of Engineering and Information Technology at UTS.

**David Cole** is Senior Lecturer in Education at UTS with a particular interest in digital literacies.

**Janet Currie** is Senior Lecturer and coordinator for all Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE) program areas in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at UTS.

**John Daly** is Professor and Dean of Nursing, Midwifery and Health at UTS.

**Denise Dignam** is Professor and Associate Dean Teaching and Learning in the Faculty of Nursing, Midwifery and Health.

**Rosemary Faire** lectures in and coordinates the Master of Music Therapy course at UTS and has a special interest in using music as a means of bonding infants and parents.

**Cathrine Fowler** is Professor for the Tresillian Chair in Child and Family Health at the Centre for Midwifery, Child and Family Health within the University of Technology, Sydney Faculty of Nursing, Midwifery and Health.

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**Peter James** is Director of Information Technology, UTS.

**Caroline Homer** is Professor of Midwifery and the Director of the Centre for Midwifery, Child and Family Health at UTS.

**Rosemary Johnston** is Professor and Head Education, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, UTS.

**Matthew Kearney** coordinates the e-learning subjects in the BEd (Prim) and BTeach (Sec) programs at UTS and is interested in innovative technology-based learning in K-12 and teacher education contexts.

**Elisa Lee** is an award-winning designer (AMI, AIMIA, MILIA, Barcelona Emerging Art) who has worked in digital interactive media for over thirteen years.

**Lesley Ljungdahl** is Coordinator of the Bachelor of Education (Primary Education) at UTS with research interests in literacy, ESL and international practicums.

**Rob Lynch** is Professor and ex-Dean Faculty of Business, and Acting Pro-Vice Chancellor International at UTS.

**Damian Maher** has a strong interest in working with youth and lectures in the primary education program at UTS.

**Greg Martin** is Lecturer and Early Career Researcher in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, at University of Technology, Sydney.

**Paul March** is a specialist in children's writing and literacy.

**Stephen Muecke** is Professor of Cultural Studies, Australian Professorial Fellow, and Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities.

**Berto Pandolfo** is Course Director, Industrial Design in the School of Design at UTS.

**Barbara Poston-Anderson** is Associate Professor and specialist in children's drama and Associate of UTS.

**Anne Prescott** is Senior Lecturer at UTS and specialist in Maths Teacher Education.

**Sandy Schuck** is Associate Professor and Coordinator of Higher Research Degrees in Education at UTS.

**Alan Scully** lectures in Education at UTS and is a specialist in child psychology.

**Robyn Staveley** is Senior Lecturer at UTS and a well-known specialist in Music Education.

**Jude Stoddart** is Director, Equity and Diversity Unit at UTS.

**Kitty te Riele** is Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Technology Sydney and a specialist in alternative and second chance education.

**Ruth Thompson** is Manager of Student Equity at UTS.

**Sally Varnham** is Associate Professor and a specialist in child, school and family law in the Faculty of Law at UTS.

**Karen Vaughan** has worked for the past 15 years at UTS, predominantly on the Indigenous Australian block release programs, and more recently on the compulsory Indigenous Studies unit for teacher education programs.

**George Verghese** currently holds the position of Associate Head of the School of Design after nine years as the course director of Interior Design at the University of Technology, Sydney.

**Kirsty Young** is Lecturer in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Technology Sydney, involved in special education and teaching/learning in the digital age.

## 2 LITERATE AUSTRALIA PROJECT

### i OUTLINE

*Literate Australia* is an umbrella for a number of interdisciplinary cell projects that have specific outcomes relating to the education, culture and wellbeing of children and youth.

Literacy – and the idea of a literate nation – are not just educational issues but ones that relate to and are influenced by health, parenting practices, nutrition, communities and cultures of influence, and the larger sphere of government policies.

This project, or nest of projects, conceptualises literacy not only in terms of skills but in terms of the idea of literate imaginations, and of thinking as being reflective of its most profound aspect. It will explore what ‘literacy’ means and should mean in Australia and to Australians of the twenty-first century. It will make rigorous enquiry into best international practice, with particular attention to those countries that, like Australia, have indigenous and multicultural populations.

This is an innovative and creative project that will gather diverse sources of funding for its diverse cells of inquiry, all of which will contribute to knowing about, and doing about, how to make every child in the nation achieve high literacy standards in all senses of the definition.

It will inquire into such questions as:

- How can a national education curriculum best embrace the complex language and literacy needs of Australia’s diverse communities?
- What strategies can be put in place to improve those parenting practices that impinge on children’s learning and school attendance? (for example, children going to bed late, not eating well, poor attitudes towards education)
- How can technology open new pathways not only for the advantaged but for the disadvantaged and disenfranchised (historically, geographically and socially)?
- How can an interdisciplinary focus work towards improving health and nutrition for children in disadvantaged communities?
- What new ways of doing school should be considered for children for whom mainstream schooling is not working?
- What are some creative ways that technology can be used to generate innovative educational, cultural and social communities?
- How can city spaces best be designed for child and family-friendliness?
- How can healthy participation in physically active lifestyles be effectively promoted to young people?

# LITERATE AUSTRALIA

ROSEMARY ROSS JOHNSTON

## A | OVERVIEW

### 1 WHAT IS A LITERATE NATION?

This paper argues that a literate Australia is a social, political and human imperative. Literacy is more than its associated skills – reading and writing, speaking and listening – although those skills are its essential tools. It is more than ‘being educated,’ although it is the idea of being educated that helps to give literacy its popular symbolic value.

Literacy is a profound concept. It helps to give organisation to thought and indeed grows thinking. As noted in the project outline, this capacity to develop thinking is at once the most powerful and the most intimate aspect of literacy; ‘I think therefore I am,’ said Descartes; thoughts ‘impact and subtly change the self who thinks them,’ wrote Eliot. Access to layers of words is access to layers of thought, and access to layers of thought helps to breed the literacy of the imagination. Growing the capacity for imagination grows the capacity for making the leap (Heidegger’s ‘leap of thought’) into awareness of other ‘I’s as authentic as one’s own ‘I’. Thus imagination breeds subjunctive modes of thinking: ‘Were this me - how would I feel?’ Such subjunctive thinking, about the rights and truths of others, in turn breeds and informs a sense of human equity, rightness, and social justice.

A literate nation is one that knows how to read, and reads; knows how to learn, and learns; and knows how to think, and thinks. It looks after its health, because it can imagine what will happen if it doesn’t, and because it is oriented towards the welfare of all its citizens, irrespective of racial heritage, age, or gender. It understands that effective education for young people is essential but that education, and good schooling, and simple things like children getting up to go to school in the morning, are inextricably bound to good health and nutrition, sound parenting practices, safe and secure built and natural environments, and a protective and ethical political and legal system.

A literate nation aspires at some deep level to generating and inspiring ‘mind’ – which is more than what we think with, more than the place where we think. Such aspirations relate not only to engaging with cargoes of knowledge, but also to personal interaction and contribution, and doing good with that knowledge.

The minds of a literate nation think across borders and encourage senses of identity that refuse to be constrained by a single descriptor – race or creed or gender or age or occupation or interest affiliation – and that refuse to label or brand others in this simplistic way. Such minds

are more nuanced, at once both individually distinctive and ‘commonly’ human; they think beyond a ‘them’ and ‘us’.

UTS recently hosted a Nobel exhibition which was called ‘Beautiful Minds,’ and which celebrated the work of Nobel Prize winners whose thoughts and achievements in the fields of physics, chemistry, physiology or medicine, literature, and peace have had world impact. It was something rather special; we live in times where words such as ‘beautiful’ are not easily trusted – particularly in educational contexts. The very idea of beautiful is suspect – it is too subjective, too exclusive, too non-rigorous, too untestable. It is not robust. Separated from the ‘nobility’ of the Nobel, the notion of a beautiful mind would no doubt be dismissed as sentimental, or at the very least rather theatrical.

But a beautiful mind is a powerful idea, especially as we consider the lives of children and youth – that is, consider nourishing Australian futures. A literate Australia perceives the idea of beauty in this context as something generative that relates to imaginative thinking and healthy inner life, to aspirations and dreams. Such minds drill into both old and new knowledges to find new solutions and create distinctive stories. They may not be conventionally ‘beautiful’ – Alfred Nobel himself dreamed dynamite as well as peace.

The minds of a literate nation glimpse, dream, question, hope, learn, consider, create, persevere, argue, believe in, critique, review, energise, teach, innovate, and do.

## 2 WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM DERIVATIONS AND HISTORY

Literacy is a loaded word – educationally, culturally, socially – and its meanings have shifted in different contexts and at different times. In the world of the twenty-first century, literacy has come to be applied most generally to the achievement of skills related to reading and writing – skills which have outcomes that are measurable, that can be ‘tested.’ Traditional definitions relate to the ability to communicate (and be communicated with) through the use of language – to be able to read and to write, to speak and to listen.

The technological revolution of the twentieth century has impacted strongly on ideas about literacy. In a draft document, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) defines literacy as ‘the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning to enable an individual to achieve his or her goals, to develop his or her knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in the wider society.’

This definition not only includes the word ‘compute’ (connoting if not denoting technology); it pushes literacy way beyond the attainment of skills into a domain that relates to the means by which individual potential is fulfilled, and social as well as personal benefits are achieved.

It also necessarily implicates the significance of community. *Literacy relates to community.* It is not only an individual attribute but a communal one; it contributes individually and communally. It not only helps to build community but helps to shape the type of community that is built.

There are various etymological histories of 'literacy' and its related adjectives 'literate' and 'illiterate'. Most agree that the word 'literacy' first appears in 1883, but that 'literate' appeared in 1432, and its generally accepted antonym ('illiterate') dates from about 1660. Derivations reveal a complex history. It was formed in imitation of the Greek *grammatikos* from the Latin *lit(t)era* meaning 'letter'. The Greek alphabet was transmitted to the Romans through the Etruscan language; words dealing with writing include *elementum*, whose earlier meaning was 'letter of the alphabet', *litterae*, 'writing' (originally derived from Greek *diphthera* (διφθέρα, διφθέρα 'skin', a material on which people wrote); *stylus*, 'writing implement', and *cera*, 'wax' (for wax tablets on which to take notes). The Latin *lit(t)eratus*, *litterātus* m. (feminine *litterāta*, neuter *litterātum*; first/second declension), whilst it meant literally 'one who knows the letters', denoted 'educated, scholarly, learned, erudite, cultured'. Related words are the French *lettré*, Italian *letterato*, Portuguese *letrado*, Portuguese *literato*, Romanian *literat*, Spanish *literato*, and Spanish *letrado*.

The status of 'letters' (and the derivation) is retained today in prestigious postgraduate degrees awarded by many universities: M.Litt., D.Litt. (Master of Letters *Magister Litterarum*, Doctor of Letters *Doctor Litterarum*).

The idea of literacy has always been influenced by the concerns of the culture in which it is being discussed. In an age that prides itself on principles and goals (many unattained) of universal education and equities, it has become intensely political – literacy is no longer the province solely of educators, schools and departments of education; it is the concern of governments, even as we have seen of a global organisation such as UNESCO. Governments have to answer to their constituents about what is being achieved in schools, and schools have to answer to governments and to their wider communities. Literacy is increasingly measured externally through standard – and standardising – tests. Here however there is something of an anomaly; what are being measured are skills such as reading and comprehension and spelling and writing. This is a highly significant part of the story but not the whole story: the rhetoric may conflate these skills – somewhat simplistically although arguably with good reason – into ideas of broad educational excellence, and the capacity of individual children to achieve potential and to become contributing members of society. But *litterarum* emphasised an ongoingness – UNESCO's continuum; this implies a progressive and continuing education that tests may not always capture, facilitate, or encourage.

'Letters' and its derivations and the semantic twists and turns of 'literacy' contribute towards the breadth and depth of understanding what a literate nation of the twenty-first century should look like.

### 3 LITERACY AND EDUCATION

There is no doubt that the literacy of a population constitutes part of that nation's human and intellectual capital – its resources. And there are many telling examples of how intensive literacy programs have changed the face of communities and the face of their nations – interpreted at a simple level through providing individuals with better employment opportunities – and the nation with skilled labour.

Government programs that have specifically focused on developing literacy – that is, teaching all children to read and write – have had amazing success and produced startling economic development. Amartya Sen, referring to the Japanese Fundamental Code of Education (1875) which stated, ‘There shall, in the future, be no community with an illiterate family, nor a family with an illiterate person’, notes that between 1906 and 1911, money spent on education represented as much as 43% of the budgets of Japanese towns and villages. He writes:

By 1906, the recruiting army officers found that, in contrast with the late nineteenth century, there was hardly any new recruit who was not already literate. By 1910, Japan had, it is generally acknowledged, universal attendance in primary schools. By 1913, even though Japan was still economically very poor and underdeveloped, it had become one of the largest producers of books in the world, publishing more books than Britain and indeed more than twice as many as the United States. (2006, pp.110-111)

Such programs are almost always delivered through schools, and the general process (social, cultural, ideological) of schooling – education – is also a powerful factor. But literacy is at the very heart of schooling – the first thing we teach infant newcomers is to know their letters, and to read and write.

The ‘Stars of Africa’ series of books for young children in South Africa is badged with the logo *Building a Nation of Readers*. One book in this wonderful little series tells the story of Mama Nozincwadi who could not read but who loved and collected books. One day she hears of a village boy, Muzi, who has been sent home from school because his parents cannot afford to buy him a book he needs. She takes Muzi to town and buys the book for him. Later, to thank her, he reads her the story.

Mama Nozincwadi sat still. Her eyes were wide open as she listened to every word that Muzi read from his book. When he looked up, he saw her face and he was very pleased with himself.

‘Child, do you want to tell me that these books are like wise old people who can take you by the hand and teach you many things about life?’ she asked him.

‘Yes, Mama, I like books for that. Also it feels like I am talking to the person who wrote that book. Sometimes it makes me feel as if I can go with the eyes of my mind to the places in the book, and I thank you for your help.’

Mama Nozincwadi wanted to know more. ‘What else do you read about in school?’

‘At school we learn about how electricity is made. We read about bird life and animals, the rolling hills and mountains of KwaZulu-Natal and the trees and sugar cane that grow there. We learn about the big world we live in and the many things we see around us every day.’ (Mhlophe, 2001)

There is a clear political implication in the logo and ethos of this series, not just that everyone needs to be literate, but that making readers (and, by extension, making literate beings) is part of the act of building a nation – of building a national story.

## 4 TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CHALLENGES AND EXPANSION OF IDEAS OF LITERACY

So etymologically, literacy relates to knowing letters, and thus making meaning through and from text. However, by the end of the twentieth century these terms of definition – ‘making meaning’, ‘being educated’, even ‘reading’, ‘writing’ and ‘text’ – became problematic. The mysterious processing between perceiving letters and the making of meaning thereafter is extremely complex and personal; ‘being educated’ may be culturally provocative; ‘text’ – once simply a book or a piece of narrative – has expanded to include any communication involving language; and ‘language’ now includes images, which are ‘read.’ Book of the Year in the 2007 NSW Premier’s Literary Awards was Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival*, a (wordless) graphic novel.

### i THE CONCEPT OF THE MULTILITERACIES

Towards the end of the twentieth century, and seeking to capture these changes as part of literacy understandings, academics began referring to the concept of multiliteracy or multiliteracies. The concept of visual literacy – the reading of signs – was by then beginning to find its way into syllabi around the country. Increasing social awareness generated the idea of cultural literacy – defined partly as knowledge of the world (‘cultural schemata’), but much more importantly, as I have written elsewhere, as ‘the knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of diverse ways of being’ (2001, p.294).

Reading is stimulus, perception, and response, but it is also active and vigorous: readers ‘write’ as part of what they are reading, mixing it within their own frameworks of thinking and inscribing it within their own experiences.

Knowledge of the world relates to all the bits and pieces of knowledge that readers have to piece together in order to make sense of language and the social structures within which they live. Learners of second languages need such knowledge to contextualise semantics and create meaning: a simple sentence, such as ‘And then the bell went,’ makes no sense to a child struggling through a school story in a new language unless he or she knows that in many schools the bell represents the end of the school day.

More importantly, however, cultural literacy implies that deep understandings of one’s own world must lead to respect for the world of others. It posits ideas of human equity and goodwill. In appreciating different ways of doing things, without setting up ‘them’ and ‘us’ borders, it relates to becoming aware with integrity of the corrals of one’s own thinking, one’s predispositions and the influence of one’s personal life experiences. It relates to being open to different social behaviours, different ways of doing things, different sorts of formats, different ideas about beginnings and endings, different ideas even about what language should be, and different ideas about literacy.

A plethora of other so-called 'literacies' has followed – information literacy, digital literacy, narrative literacy, mathematical literacy, statistical literacy and so on. This idea can be overdone. But there is one other controversial literacy that needs to be acknowledged as part of a literate nation: critical literacy.

## ii CRITICAL LITERACY

Despite criticism and debate – which should be seen as healthy – the basic principles of critical literacy are essential not only in the making of 'knowing readers', but in the making of knowing viewers and knowing citizens. Critical literacy is usually associated with reading, but it is a life skill. Learning how to read and view texts critically, with discernment, encourages recognition of the power of the written word, and of where any text is trying to position its readers: onside (to agree or disagree), offside (to unsettle), outside (to exclude), inside (a 'we' and an 'our' that selectively marginalises others).

Being critically literate provides tools that encourage discernment of intent in the words and images of films and advertising. It encourages listeners to be similarly discerning of the 'backstories' and 'underground' of spoken words.

Critical literacy helps to make readers, listeners and viewers aware of the cultural, political, and historical contexts of any written, spoken or visual communication. It breeds discriminating readers, listeners and viewers who are aware of and, if they choose to, resist facile manipulation.

There are many interpretations of critical literacy; updating earlier work (2001, p.320), I define it as the following:

Critical literacy is the capacity to read, speak, write, watch and listen with knowledge of language and how it works; to appreciate the diverse purposes and contexts for text and diverse multimodalities of communication; to have awareness of where and how languages (verbal and visual) are positioning readers, viewers and listeners; and to perceive the ideas, values, attitudes and motivations that constitute the implicit framework of texts and out of which texts are generated.

## 5 LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

Australia is home to many native speakers and readers of other languages. One of the challenges for a nation such as ours is to consider the ways, explicit and implicit, that we regard speaking in languages other than English. For all our multicultural social fabric, we remain, in educational programs and curricula, a monolingual nation – startlingly so, compared to schools in Europe, Canada and Scandinavia for example. There is no doubt, and the technological revolution confirms, that English is the language of shared communication. English is a happy sponge – it is not as protective as say French (which has made laws against allowing English words in when there is a French word that expresses the same meaning), and voluptuously absorbed many words from many languages. In part, this is why it has become so strong.

Children and their families may well be highly literate in their own languages, but have poor English. It must be acknowledged that they are not illiterate. A literate nation must seek ways of respecting and affirming the many languages spoken on its soil, sometimes underground (and sometimes having been driven underground). It must also provide every person with exposure to learning the English they will need in order to maximise opportunity, choices, potential and social contribution.

This is not an easy challenge. It is particularly not easy in relation to indigenous languages. Rather than discouraging their use, this nation needs to seek creative ways of structuring bilingual programs that encourage facility and respect for both languages.

## 6 THE POLITICS OF LITERACY

Literacy is power. At various times in various countries, including nineteenth century USA, the ability to read and write (and sign one's full name) was a prerequisite to the right to vote. In various countries at different times, learning literacy skills was protected, kept secret, embargoed; it was the right of certain people but not the right of all. Professional scribes could read and write but not the common populace. During the American Civil War period it was considered too dangerous to allow black slaves access to learning how to read and write.

Religion has played an important role in spreading literacy. The Puritan desire to teach people to read the Bible led to high literacy standards in eighteenth century New England; by the time of the American Revolution it is generally accepted that in this area there was something like 90% literacy.

The work of Paolo Freire (1921-1997) among the disadvantaged poor of Brazil, and the titles of his books – *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972) and *Pedagogy of Hope* (1995) indicate both the repressiveness of illiteracy and the liberating, emancipatory power of literacy. As Newman, discussing the work of Freire, points out, while ever we are constrained to use the words or visions of others we remain 'objects of social history' (2006, p.204), whereas in being able to articulate our own views of our own experiences (that is, speak our 'true words'), we 'become subjects of our own destiny' (p.205).

This is a reason why Australian map makers should include Aboriginal regions on mainstream maps. Jeremy Black, in *Maps and Politics* (1998), points out that the so-called exact science of cartography rests on subjective and political decisions not only about centres and polarities but about what is important enough to be included, and how. Adding the names of traditional indigenous regions (indicated with dotted lines or different colours or whatever) affords both acknowledgement and respect, and adds an historical/geographic layer to national story that can only enrich the Australian mapspace.

## 7 NATION AS CONTESTED SPACE

Nation is geographical, historical, economic, philosophical, spiritual space. Australia is a place and space of national identity, a place and space of belonging, of homeland, and of certain

concomitant rights. It is a singular multitude of subjective spaces, which tend to function, slightly shifting an idea of John Shotter (1993, pp.21,35), as 'extensions of ourselves' – as part of the 'complex relation between people's identities and their "hook-up" to their surroundings'. Physical and spiritual connections to place have long and deep traditions in many cultures.

Alongside rights, loyalties and identities, such connections bring responsibilities, and in our age these responsibilities have become increasingly problematical. In his discussion of modernism and postmodernism, the two great philosophical and intellectual movements of the twentieth century, Lyotard noted three problems relating to the postmodern. First, (and although Lyotard is talking in terms of architecture, we could extrapolate to nation), the postmodern perspective is an horizon-less landscape, a 'bricolage', a 'destiny of repetition and quotation' which is 'condemned to abandon a global perspective of the space of human habitation' (1992, pp.76-77). Second, in the developments of the complex world of technoscience, 'we can observe a kind of decline in the confidence that, for two centuries, the West invested in the principle of a general progress in humanity' (p.77). In this dehumanising and dehumanised world, humans, Lyotard writes, 'are like Gullivers ...: sometimes too big, sometimes too small, but never the right size' (p.79). Third, in the 'expressions of thought' that include 'visual and plastic arts', literature, philosophy and politics, the idea of 'a kind of work, a long, obstinate and highly responsible work' (which was part of the true process of avant-gardism and modernity) must be restored as part of human 'responsibility ...' (pp.79-80).

Margaret Wertheim, in a book devoted to the exploration of cyberspace within a more expansive cultural history of space, also writes of the difficulties facing postmodern Western society:

Like the late Romans, we too live in a time marked by inequity, corruption and fragmentation. Ours seems to be a society past its peak, one no longer sustained by a firm belief in itself and no longer sure of its purpose. (1999, p.23)

Wertheim's thesis is that 'conceptions of space and conceptions of ourselves are inextricably intertwined' (p.37), that space and conceptions of space provide the key to understanding an evolving world, and that 'the production of space – any kind of space – is necessarily a communal activity' (p.306).

As Wertheim points out, 'it is the language we use – the concepts that we articulate and hence the questions that we ask – that determines the kind of space we are able to see' (p.306).

Language and ideas of nation are closely connected. Words spoken and written about nation help to constitute what nation is. This relates to performativity theory as espoused by Austin, Butler, and Derrida, which argues the relationship of speech to act, and of act to identity. How we talk about ourselves, write about ourselves, how we are talked about and are cited by others, iterates and reiterates and comes to be what we are. Words and images written about us construct ideas of identity, community and belonging (or not-belonging). It is an interactive symbiotic cycle, and sometimes we even appear willingly to write ourselves into personal and national stereotypes, taking pride in those areas in which we are most distinctively different.

The cognitive scientist Andy Clark builds on the French philosopher/phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty's ideas of whole organism-body-world synergies to develop his own concept of 'continuous reciprocal causation': that is, 'the idea that we must go beyond the passive image of the organism perceiving the world and recognise the way *our actions may be continuously responsive to world events which are at the same time being continuously responsive to our actions*' (1999, p.171, my italics). Clark quotes Hilditch's description of action and perception coalescing as a kind of 'free form interactive dance between perceiver and perceived' (p.172).

A nation has to be concerned with asking the right questions and finding the right words. It has to be concerned with human responsibility, with that 'long, obstinate and highly responsible work', and with actively seeking improvement rather than passively accepting decline.

There is evidence of change. Across the disciplines, in the work of such diverse thinkers as Edward O. Wilson, Geoff Mulgan, John Ralston Saul, Simon Schama, Stephen Hawking, Paul Davies, Margaret Wertheim, there are interesting ontological discussions about space – geographies of space, webs of space – that are physical, mental, emotional, spiritual. These ideas connect in fascinating ways with ideas of nation as space, and, particularly relevant to nations with contested spaces, to religious and indigenous cosmologies of immanence and transcendence, and of attachment to and belonging to land.

Indigenous totems are expressions of such attachment. The Australian Aboriginal artist of the Arrawar region, Kame, expressed her life and being in a series of paintings of sweet potatoes: as tubers and deep tangled roots entwined underground; as shoots beginning to form and break through the dry, cracked earth; as a golden explosion of blossom. Kame was a Sweet Potato woman. This is her totem, her connections to self, landscape, community and Dreaming – past the national, to the infinite.

Claudine Herrmann writes:

[T]he disposition of space for man is above all an image of power, the maximum power being attained when one can dispose of the space of others ...  
(1981, p.168)

A literate nation doesn't seek to dispose; rather, it seeks to make space beyond ideas of power and ownership. It respects the deep sense of spiritual commitment of all its citizens to land and place – that of Kame and the richnesses of Dreaming, and that of Christians and Jews and others who feel a similarly deep and profound love and attachment to something they can never own but that they see as God's creation of the natural world.

The difficulty for Australia is that it has different senses of past and differing conceptions of pastness – 220 years against more than 50,000 years, linearity against circularity. A literate nation must accept its differing pasts – their conflicts and their strengths – in order to work towards presents and futures that acknowledge and desire not only reconciliation, but a shared vision. Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* (1991) plays out this drama as a powerful and moving metaphor, with great integrity.

## 8 NATION, WORLD VIEW AND COSMOLOGIES

There are many faiths in Australia, and many different world views. Wertheim's deracinated world, noted earlier, is a literary conception of the physical. It is interesting indeed to compare this with two other world views that emerge from diverse cultural heritages – one, that of Western science and the other that of Australian Aboriginality – and both of which imply and/or confirm physical unity rather than postmodern disunity.

Discussing string theory, popular science writer, Brian Greene, writes:

[A]ccording to string theory, the observed properties of each elementary particle arise because its internal string undergoes a particular vibrational pattern. This perspective differs sharply from that espoused by physicists before the discovery of string theory; in the earlier perspective the differences among the fundamental particles were explained by saying that, in effect, each particle species was 'cut from a different fabric.' Although each particle was viewed as elementary, the kind of 'stuff' each embodied was thought to be different. Electron 'stuff', for example, had negative electronic charge, while neutrino 'stuff' had no electric charge. String theory alters this picture radically by declaring that the 'stuff' of all matter and all forces is the same. Each elementary particle is composed of a single string – that is, each particle is a single string – and all strings are absolutely identical. Differences between the strings arise because their respective strings undergo different resonant vibrational patterns. What appear to be different elementary particles are actually different 'notes' on a fundamental string. The universe – being composed of an enormous number of vibrating strings – is akin to a cosmic symphony.

This overview shows how string theory offers a truly wonderful unifying framework. Every particle of matter and every transmitter of force consists of a string whose pattern of vibration is its 'fingerprint.' Because every physical event, process, or occurrence in the universe is, at its most elementary level, describable in terms of forces acting between these elementary material constituents, string theory provides the promise of a single, all-inclusive, unified description of the physical universe: a theory of everything.

(1999, pp.145-146)

It is fascinating to read this scientific explanation of the physical universe alongside the Australian Aboriginal idea of the Dreaming: Ancestor beings made a noise, the noise became singing, and the singing created land, landforms, and themselves as beings. 'You dream, You sing, It is.' This becomes even more significant when Greene goes on to discuss 'the music of string theory.'

It is also fascinating to consider both these views alongside the idea in Indian languages of 'Aum'. Blanche and Beattie write:

According to Eastern belief, 'Aum' is the sound whose vibrations built the universe; it is at once all the voices, all the sounds of all beings in existence, past, present and future. Sound is at the centre of each person, and the greatness of the human soul is expressed through music and poetry. (2000, p.22)

Kushwant Singh points out that in Sikh theology, Aum is 'the symbol of God' (2002, p.114).

These world views stress connectedness, one ostensibly physically, the others more spiritually, but all spilling over into complex and profound ontological spaces. All of us, as particles of energy and matter, are at the deepest level, connected to the universe, resonating with it as part of Greene's 'cosmic symphony'. It is this sense of physical and spiritual connection and community – not of sameness (we each have our own 'fingerprint', are each 'tiny pieces of vibrating string', p.146) – that a literate nation needs as it builds a strong future.

## 9 RESEARCH AND MAKING A NATION

Research is transformative, and researchers are 'transformers': educators and teacher-scholars who sometimes change and give new shape to awareness of *what is*, by describing it, and sometimes 'draw out' and 'raise up' (*educo*) awareness of *what is not* but *could be*, perhaps suggesting reasons and resources for change. As I have written elsewhere, research is a creative act:

Researchers-as-artists choose words carefully and aesthetically not only to describe but to inspire, and to construct new stages for debate and discussion. (2002, p.316)

There is a strong and responsible work to be done. The 'Stars of Africa' series of children's books referred to earlier, and its logo (*Building a Nation of Readers*) is an outcome of researchers and teachers working together to demonstrate the importance of story, arguing the importance of story to private and public organisations (publishers and governments), and promoting a receptive and informed cultural and educational climate.

## 10 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF NATIONAL STORY

In the West, we may feel that the importance of story is obvious. We need however to tell it – for there is power in the telling. Talk-story constructs lives. At a conference in Africa a few years ago, a fellow researcher described the way in which young girls at puberty are deliberately educated into tribal knowledge. The girl is taken to a special place and surrounded by women elders who one after another and for several days, tell her about her ancestors, repeating over and over again the stories that are part of their common past. The researcher described this practice as a 'waterfall of stories' being poured over the head of the girl. The purpose of this intensive storytelling is overtly focused, first, to regenerate the past, and second, to enlarge conceptions of the present; the stories 'bring the ancestors up' to meet one of their progeny,

and demonstrate to the young girl entering adulthood that she is connected to and belongs to a space and time that is beyond herself and her own moment.

This image of the waterfall of stories has stayed with me, an example of the language art of the researcher. Her description of this cultural practice and its purposes reminded me of the words of another researcher, Mikhail Bakhtin, who coined the term 'Great Time' to describe a 'fullness of time' that is the 'perspectives of centuries' (1986, p.4), and that transcends any individual lifetime, of either a person or a literary text. Human lives, like literary texts, are made denser and deeper when we 'break through the boundaries' of our own time into a sense of time that is populated with others, that is characterised by, in Bakhtin's words again, '*not-I* in me, that is, existence in me; something-larger-than-me-in-me' (1986, p.146). This conception of Great Time does not in any way detract from individual significance, rather, it inherently adds to it by connecting the individual to a time that exceeds personal experience.

Our role as researchers is to push intellectual boundaries, challenge established ideas and practices, and stimulate and give seeability to creative ideas (including those that are our own). It is to be daring. In Australia we have a geography, a 'vibrant spiritual landscape' (Anderson 1987), written and read through image and story as the 'maintenance and affirmation of Aboriginality' (Kleinart and Neale 2000, p.vi-vii). It is a land indented with a spiritual sense of Dreaming ('Great Time'), a land criss-crossed by songline and traced with rock art stories that are arguably forty thousand years old (p.105). These stories do not belong to all of us, and there are other stories, but they are part of the national story that we all share, and there are ways of being welcomed into them.

## 11 TRANSDISCIPLINARITY, INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND LITERACY

Literacy is chameleon – it can change what it looks like according to where it is, who is looking, who is speaking, who is listening, and what is being said. It was ever thus – as the grammatical idea of register acknowledges.

It is also beyond containment in any one discipline. Literacy is a spacious interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary concept; it sits between, across and beyond the disciplines. It also sits among them, and right in them.

Interdisciplinarity refers to how knowledge in one discipline (say Music) can enhance knowledge in another discipline (say Maths). In the production of transdisciplinary knowledge, however, 'the intellectual agenda is not set within a particular discipline ...' (Gibbons et al, 1994, p.27). Thus transdisciplinary ideas about literacy and a literate nation are inclusive not exclusive, built around concepts of non-linearity, nodes, links and networks (see, for example, Landor, 1992).

Learning theorists such as Gibbons and others discuss two modes of knowledge production: *Mode 1*, which is traditional, disciplinary, homogeneous, organisationally formulated and preserved; and *Mode 2*, which is transdisciplinary, heterogeneous, heterarchical and organisationally transient (Gibbons et al, 1994, p.3). Literacy is both; it is part of serious literature study (*Mode 1*) as well as part of youth mobile messaging cultures (*Mode 2*).

## 12 LITERACY AND ETHICS

The literacy of a nation has multiple ethical layers – ethics relating to equity, opportunity, mutualities of respect, duty of care for the young and the old and those who cannot care for themselves, speak for themselves or write for themselves. Its practices must encourage moral questionings and public gaze. It must promote the art, drama and literature that explore these concerns; Lisabeth During notes that ‘moral education, far from being irrelevant to art, is precisely what the artist, and particularly the novelist, can perform, none better’ (1998, p.66). Ethics and morality go together: they are part of deep response to the complexities and mysteries of difference. They must underwrite decision making and the formulation of national policies.

# B WAYS FORWARD

## 1 FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness is ahistorical. It breaks the concatenation of causes and effects, crimes and punishments, it stays the time of actions. A strange space opens up in a timelessness that is not one of the primitive unconscious, desiring and murderous, but its counterpart – its sublimation with full knowledge of the facts, a loving harmony that is aware of its violences but accommodates them, elsewhere ...

Let me emphasise the timelessness of forgiving ...

Forgiveness does not cleanse actions. It raises the unconscious from beneath the actions and has it meet a loving other – an other who does not judge but hears my truth in the availability of love, and for that very reason allows me to be reborn. Forgiveness is the luminous stage of dark, unconscious timelessness – the stage at which the latter changes laws and adopts the bond with love as a principle of renewal of both self and other. (Kristeva, 1989, pp.173-205)

## 2 NATION AS COMMUNITY

All nations have frameworks of philosophy around which they shape themselves and construct national story, and which influence educational, health, business and legal policies and practices. Such frameworks also construct ideas about knowledge. As Jordan and Weedon note (1995, p.532), indigenous perspectives see knowledge as constantly reproducing and evolving, and as belonging to past, present and future. Thus it is the province not of an expert individual, but of a whole community.

Postmodernism, that master narrative of the late twentieth century, has inflated the significance of the individual, of the 'I' who thinks and therefore is, but has damaged the sense of commonality that is community. Paradoxically, the diminution of community also diminishes the individual. Harries notes:

Whereas the West is dominated by Descartes' 'I think therefore I am', in African traditional society the prevailing ethos is that of *ubuntu*, 'I am with others, therefore I am'. (2002, p.140)

Indigenous modes of knowledge transmission – story and song cycle and visual arts and dance and drama – give shape to whole cultural, learning, and spiritual experience. A shared Australian discourse must bring together indigenous and Western thinkers with a view towards ideas that are inclusive of the best traditions of each. The challenge is to find a language of consonance

even among difference, without a diminution of what each considers most distinctive, most sacred, and most precious.

Nation is community. A literate nation listens and speaks and acts inclusively. It is both sustainable and sustains. It is creative. In the Australian context, there are rich possibilities of making meaningful connections in terms of the centrality of the arts in indigenous learning experience and in Western cultural experience. Perhaps this can encourage mainstream re-engagement with ideas of spirit and soul, with grappling with the challenges of the unknown and the unknowable. Perhaps also it can provide the sophisticated abilities necessary for living in a multi-faith as well as a multicultural society, and for negotiating those differences that are held most dearly.

### 3 A LITERATE NATION AND SUSTAINABILITY

We are all familiar with sustainability as an economic and social practice that actively seeks to ensure that the demands of the marketplace (local and global) do not threaten, deplete or destroy the natural environment. In a nutshell, sustainability means *using*, without *using up*. But the word has wider meanings than those; dictionary definitions of 'sustain' include such phrases as 'to keep up', 'keep going', 'keep in existence', 'maintain', 'prolong', 'aid', 'assist'; 'to supply with necessities or nourishment', 'to hold up', 'support', 'keep from falling or sinking', 'prop'; 'to bear, endure, support the spirits or vitality or resolution of', 'to endure without giving way', 'encourage', 'withstand, stand'; 'to suffer, experience'; 'to allow, admit, favour'; 'to agree with, confirm, corroborate, sanction, affirm the validity of' (*Shorter Oxford Dictionary, Oxford Reference Dictionary, Readers' Digest Universal Dictionary*). The derivation is from the Anglo-French *sustein*, stem of *sustenir* from L *sustinere*, to hold up, = *sub* (from) under + *tenere* = to hold.

Thus sustainability relates not only to practices which can be sustained, but *which themselves sustain*, which 'hold up' and 'keep from falling', which 'encourage', and provide the capacity to 'endure without giving way'. Human well-being thrives not only in green environments (significant as they are), but also in just and equitable societies where citizen rights and citizen responsibilities operate in a creative tension. Such societies recognise that humans are more than a body that needs to be sustained, and that the world is more than a geographical landscape which provides physical sustenance for those who inhabit it. They recognise that ideas of conservation and renewing must pertain not only to physical resources but also to human resources.

So sustainability is related to community and the heritage and evolution of community practices, but it is also related to inner environments, to interior life, and to that most fragile environment of all, the human spirit. A literate nation knows that sustainability is, in all senses, a practice for survival.

## 4 A LITERATE NATION AND THE ARTS

The arts – literature in all its forms, theatre and cinema, dance, music, drawing and painting and sculpture – both sustain and create literate nations. They are not an extra-curricular frill; they are an integral part of communal and personal lives; they arm for the journey; they help to make sense of the journey.

The arts are historically and culturally charged ‘habitats’ which emerge from the experience of humankind in history. Discipline-driven Western curricula have tended to separate the arts from mainstream learning. On the other hand, indigenous modes of knowledge and wisdom transmission are arts-based and arts-generated; story and song cycle and dance and visual arts shape and are shaped by social, learning, and spiritual experience.

Whilst Western curricula may not necessarily reflect this, the arts play a vital role in the constitution of national capital and national heritage. It is important to note that they are ‘creative’ not only for those who create them (the artists and writers and composers) but for those who interact with them and imaginatively participate in them, as readers and viewers.

*The Oxford Concise Dictionary* defines ‘create’ as ‘to bring into existence’; other dictionaries define ‘creative’ as ‘inventive and imaginative’, ‘creating or able to create’, ‘characterised by originality and expressiveness’, ‘stimulating’ (*Oxford Reference Dictionary, Readers Digest Universal Dictionary*).

The many creative forms of the arts stimulate and inspire responsive creativity – activating thinking and the engagement of the emotions, inspiring senses of the aesthetic, generating connections between artistic and lived experience. Creativity is contagious, both active and vicarious; it jumps from one thought to another, from one mind to another, from one imagination to another, from one mode of expression to another, from outer worlds to inner worlds, and from inner worlds to outer worlds.

A literate nation is creative and creatively-textured. Through its policies and practices, through the investments (both financial and other) that it is prepared to make in the education of its young, it recognises the significance of the arts in teaching and learning and in making provision not only for sustainable presents but also for creative futures. In valuing a culture of multiple artistic experiences, it encourages the capacity to listen with the mind as well as the ear, to see with the spirit as well as the eyes.

The arts play to and play out the great mystery in human lives (the inexplicable, the otherwise inexpressible). They provide a ready forum for the discussion of moral issues, with all their concomitant stresses and ambiguities. Books and drama and art do not necessarily provide pat answers; rather, they peel open – sometimes rip – the sites of the most challenging of questions. They help to unpick and interpret the density of living, as we do in Australia, in a multicultural and multi-faith society. Readers and viewers peer *through* the arts – as they peer through the arts associated with religious imageries – to test and observe the engagement of others (real and fictional) with the pressures of daily life, as well as with the clouds of unknowing. Indeed, the intersection of arts and religion – Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and indigenous

religions – provides an insightful and respectful introduction to negotiating the intercultural/interfaith divide.

The arts promote vision and understandings that are at once deeply personal and beyond the personal. Individuals are not sustainable - they are mortal. Here in this most challenging area, the arts – as religions do – sustain the spirit by giving a glimpse and a hope of something more.

## 5 CURRICULUM AND A LITERATE AUSTRALIA

The proposed introduction of a national curriculum – a single, world-class Australian curriculum for all students from Kindergarten to Year 12 – addresses the development of a best practice study program for schools across the country. In a mobile society, a national curriculum has obvious benefits for students, teachers, employers, parents, and governments.

It also provides an invaluable opportunity to think about how a truly ‘national’ curriculum can contribute at a deep level to a literate nation. Australia has a dual history, geographies of multiple languages and landscapes, and a culture of multiple heritages. The introduction of a national curriculum provides opportunities to think beyond the emphasis on ‘curriculum’ to an emphasis on ‘national’ – and to consider ways and means of making curriculum truly national.

This is an opportunity to provoke radical but informed thinking, not thinking necessarily constrained by inherited systems. Such thinking interrogates; it may confirm what already is, or not.

It may, for example, suggest options such as rethinking the core subject of the curriculum – in Australia, ‘English’ – and (whilst I love it, and revel in its literature and language) consider it rather as, say, ‘Languages, Literatures and Multimodal Communications’, or more simply ‘Languages and Literatures’.

This may be a mouthful, but perhaps it would be a taste more suitable for Australia – with its rich indigenous and diverse cultural provenances – as a literate nation. It also accommodates ideas about the reading of images and signs (reading the visual) as part of language and literacy. This is in accord with traditions of indigenous story told through the language of art. Indeed, it would be interesting to begin a discussion about a re-thinking of curriculum organisation that thus included art – and indeed musical language – in a discipline of Multimodal Communication (rather than, say, of Creative Arts, which too often, and unfairly, appear as add-ons).

Such a discipline would of course teach and respect and affirm English as the shared Australian language (its grammar and linguistics, its literature), but by its very name (the power of the word, the power of the name) would also make room for other languages, particularly a more than superficial study, for every primary-age Australian child, of an appropriate regional Aboriginal language set in its context of history and cosmology.

The study of Languages and Literatures teaches children from Kindergarten up to speak, read and write standard English. And yes, it teaches phonics as one of the ways of learning to read and write, because all children need to be able to make sound/letter connections, even when

they are, as in English, not infallible guides. This is particularly necessary for teaching Australian Aboriginal languages, which in their written form are expressed phonetically.

For the many children in Australian schools for whom English is a second language, its study must begin – as it does with a first language – with an emphasis on the spoken, rather than the written, word. This is another important factor in teaching indigenous children whose language heritages are oral. And all second language learners – including indigenous children who are not currently included in this category at least in some states – must be supported from the very beginning with the best ESL teachers and teaching.

English grammar has a strong place in this curriculum, because grammar is essential to the learning of other languages, and Australian children, like European children, must learn and be equipped for a global environment with other languages.

For indigenous children who speak a mother tongue in their homes and communities, teaching of the subject Languages and Literatures and Multimodal Communications should be bilingual (notwithstanding the former Federal Government's discontinuation of funding for Northern Territory bilingual programs).

We need to set in place specific resonances between the need to teach standards in English and the need to sustain and in some instances resurrect indigenous languages. Lack of respect of one's own language as an Aboriginal Australian is lack of respect for identity, for one's own sense of being. It is immoral, as well as unnecessary, in a well constructed curriculum.

One example of a rich area for regional study could be the Martu community of the Pilbara, part of the huge and evocative Desert Lands that are so much a part of the Australian psyche. Here there are people still living who remember the coming of the white people to the area, there is a culture that remains vibrant because each time a group came in from the desert the community was refreshed and revitalised, and there are strong connections with the modern histories of the Canning Stock Route and the Woomera Rocket Range, and thus to colonial and Commonwealth relations. There is even a text suitable for secondary schools and upper primary – the well researched histories compiled by Sue Davenport, Peter Johnson and Yuwali in *Cleared Out: First Contact in the Western Desert*, winner of the West Australian Premier's prize in 2005.

Including the study of an appropriate Aboriginal regional language for all Australian children is obviously not language for mainstream communication as such. It represents however a communication beyond language – a cultural communication, like art, like dance. Set alongside the rich traditions of English, it enhances the idea of literacy in the Australian context and demonstrates respect for those whose history stretches furthest into the past of the country we all now share.

## 6 CONCLUSION: A LITERATE NATION

This paper formulates a conceptual underpinning for the development of an interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary project (*Literate Australia*) that conceives of literacy and nationhood in terms of:

- **story** (multimodal narratives expressed through talk, various creative media, political and policy discourses);
- **ecology** (ways of relating humans to external and internal environments – this includes technology and design);
- **genealogy** (ways of relating human presents to shared pasts – this includes histories, geographies and anthropology).

The project recognises that factors which impact on children's lives are not neatly categorised in convenient disciplines but are clumps of related circumstances that may be health-related, family-related, community-related, education-related, environment-related, culture-related, technology-related, demographic-related, race-related, policy-related, politically-related.

It thus seeks to develop attitudes, values, ideas and policies that are:

- 1 **Transdisciplinary**: concerned with perceptions of deep heterogeneous and homogeneous connections across different areas, cognisant of interdependence and the holistic nature of human existence.
- 2 **Subjunctive**: generative and contagious of subjunctive modes of thinking – 'were this me, were this you, were this the situation – what if?'
- 3 **Speculative**: concerned with making and posing opportunities for 'I wonder' experiences that will generate imaginative and innovative solutions.
- 4 **Conceptual**: encouraging of the formulation of deep concepts and profound ideas that can use the best of pasts and presents to inspire futures.
- 5 **Cognisant of 'the truth of the other'**: generous-spirited, respectful of other 'I's; have a readiness to take the imaginative leap into the place of the other, to see through other eyes, and to act in shared best interest.
- 6 **Dialogic rather than monologic**: collaborative, interactive, listening to and interacting with many voices and many diverse stories.
- 7 **Positively performative**: explicitly encoding understories of possibility and creativity; striving for both do-ability and intellectual stretch in a flexible environment that encourages trial and error. This idea is informed by Bakhtin's concept of *unfinalisability*, which accepts 'unfinishedness' as part of *openness* to creativity (1984, p.166).

We are all negotiating our way into the future, and all our cultures are continuously evolving hybrids; not one of us can return to the world which used to be – geographically, historically, culturally. The multiple cultures, imported or indigenous, of this country do not always share a national vision. We all appropriate and borrow from each other, sometimes exploitatively. There are many past wrongs that cannot be righted, no matter how much we may wish them to be.

Paolo Freire wrote that literacy is 'a strategy of liberation [that] teaches people to read not only the word but the world' (1970). Extending Freire's idea, we can see that literacy liberates not only from ignorance but from our own meticulously guarded enclosures of thinking; it makes us aware that there are multiple ways of 'reading the world', and indeed that there are multiple worlds.

Ultimately, true literacy transcends the very skills it seeks to inculcate – it develops meta-thinking, thinking about thinking, ideas about ideas, knowing about and engaging not only with the complex known but the complex unknown (and unknowable).

Indigenous rock art in Kakadu and other places features the stick-like Mimi – the figure that draws itself. We are reminded that in Aboriginal thinking, the act of painting is more important than the painting itself. Running these two thoughts together (and mixing them with the performativity theory of Austin, Butler and Derrida) suggests a metaphorical idea of the act of drawing a national future, drawing it of ourselves and for ourselves, and, bearing in mind Kristeva's words about forgiveness, and as a principle of national renewal, bringing it into being.

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