

# **ADULT LITERACY PROJECT SOUTHWEST COMMUNITY HOUSES Dr Terry Whitebeach**

## **PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH**

The community house approach and the definition of literacy I employ is a wide and inclusive one: its goal is that people be assisted and encouraged to empower themselves in the ways *they* see as relevant, that they be able access wider choices and greater freedom in their lives, that they be empowered to be active community members; to overcome isolation, limited choices, and all the disadvantages that may go with those, e.g. poor health, low literacy, poor housing and nutrition, unfulfilling (or no) paid or voluntary employment, family stresses, loneliness, depression etc. We take the “soft” or “hidden” literacy approach, more often, as a first step, and are not tied to formal assessment or referral, necessarily: ours is a community development approach. We are also keen to make partnerships, work with the LINCS, service providers etc, to create and offer a coordinated approach.

## **THE SOUTHWEST COMMUNITY HOUSES ADULT LITERACY PROJECT**

In 2009 four southwest Community Houses - West Moonah, Chigwell, Maranoa Heights (Kingston) and West Winds at Woodbridge - received a grant from Tasmanian Community Fund to conduct a 3 year adult literacy project. The project is managed by a steering committee of seven, 3 house coordinators, one project officer and three board members from the West Moonah Management Board. An adult literacy project officer was appointed, to work across the communities those four houses served. She worked in the project for six months before resigning her position. I have been in position since April 2010, based for most of that time at West Moonah, now based in Chigwell and just beginning to extend the project into Kingborough. The committee has decided to appoint a second literacy officer, for 15 hours a week, based in Kingborough. My brief is to research the literacy needs that need addressing, in the four communities, devise programs that may to begin meet them, coordinate these programs and evaluate their usefulness, success or failure, support tutors and students and create transportable program manuals.

## **THE WAY I AM CONDUCTING THE PROJECT**

In some cases coordinators nominate an area of literacy concern they wish me to focus on, e.g. Bucaan - House health literacy. Where there is not a specifically requested focus I engage in house activities and programs, meet with stakeholders and relevant agencies and service providers, community members and groups and research and document individual, group and community literacy needs, and gaps in services to meet those needs. I also amass resources and add to the body of research my predecessor began to gather. An external evaluation process is presently being set up with Janine Coombs (she's very good value) to develop tools to assess the project in a number of ways: these tools will be yield useful data and be transferrable to future projects, so this is a good investment.

## PROGRAMS

The programs I currently have up and running:

**1. First Gear** – Road Rules training program and testing for L1 learner drivers: We have an MOU with DIER to teach the road rules and administer the L1 test. The first program was with Bhutanese men, new settlers. (Paid tutor). Some volunteers are now preparing to run a vehicle familiarity course – how to choose a good second-hand car, how to maintain and look after your vehicle, and other volunteer driver mentors are working with clients to do their 50 hours of supervised driving to obtain their Provisional licence. We are pretty excited that the Goodwood community centre has received a grant to purchase a second hand car to facilitate the practical side of getting a licence. This will help people who do not have access to a car.

We had 100% success with this course, all 7 men passing their L1. We are to have a graduation ceremony tomorrow, where the men will receive their certificates of attainment, and the two interpreters will receive certificates of appreciation and gifts that link their old life in Bhutan with their new life in Tasmania.

We have been asked to run the course for a second group of Bhutanese men, another request has come from a group for Afghan women and we are exploring the possibility of a course for Sudanese men, employing a member of the Sudanese community as a tutor. There are possible pathways to employment being explored here; and of course integration and community building and development begin to happen when people come together to learn and share. For refugees, particularly, it may represent an important step in becoming a functioning member of their new community. And it is a small success to celebrate after years of hardship, trauma and displacement. (n.b. There are significant refugee and new settler populations in Moonah, Chigwell and Maranoa Heights.)

L1 (First Gear, our version of it is called) is a popular course: word is out: people are beginning to ring to ask for individual or group sessions.

**2. Computer Catch Up.** This is an initiative for those (mostly older) people who feel confused by, or feel they have failed to master, computer technology. It came about by listening to people express their frustration, confusion and near despair about being able to use computers. The program offers each person 4 free vouchers, each of which can be redeemed for one-hour one-to-one session. Clients are matched with suitable tutors (I promise old (well, oldish), kind, quiet tutors) and client and tutor together set very practical and achievable goals for their 4 sessions, and both tutors and students evaluate success at achieving these goals. The aim is to give people an experience of success, and to break down some of the fear and confusion around IT. (Tutors are both paid, and volunteers) This pilot program is limited to 50 clients. Referral is by word of mouth. Many of the students prefer to learn on their own computer.

**3. Choir of High Hopes.** Members of the choir have worked over the last few months with a musician and song writer (a paid tutor) to write a new song for the choir to sing. They performed this song and others from their repertoire on Monday at the TACH conference. This program was initiated by the first literacy officer, but it had lapsed. I decided to follow it up, and reinstate it. TACH and the literacy project shared the performance fee for the choir. Yesterday I intended to have a group session with the choir. Sadly, there had been a death, and they were busy rehearsing for a funeral, (and, incidentally, their 5<sup>th</sup> performance in

6 days) so we have delayed the debrief session: but I think they enjoyed and gained much from the project, as we, their audience, did.

4. **One to one tutoring.** Whilst we are waiting for the voluntary tutor issue to be further resolved in Glenorchy, the steering committee voted to utilise paid tutors for a limited number of people: 2 clients per house. Presently we have an excellent tutor working successfully with a new settler, whose child attended the Ladybird kinder program at WMCH last term while his mother worked with her tutor. This woman is now interested in joining the beading group, which most likely will lead to friendships with other community members, and an opportunity to practise her English and become more integrated into the West Moonah community. Sadly, she cannot continue coming to WMCH for her tutoring sessions this term, as the kinder program is booked out and we cannot resolve the childcare issue, but Centrecare has generously come to the rescue and provided space for student and tutor to meet at their facility and child care for her son. An unfortunate result of community houses being TOO successful and not having infinitely expandable walls! Another program that was in the planning stage, the literacy assisted sewing group, has had to be postponed as there is not a nook or cranny free in WMCH in which to conduct it, this term.

5. **My Health My Way:** the goal of the group is to explore health issues, to improve choices and obtain and disseminate information about health and well being, manage chronic conditions and reduce depression, anxiety, stress and loneliness and thus to reduce their concomitant negative impacts on health. Currently a dedicated group is skilling themselves up in order to steer this initiative: they meet weekly to plan activities: so far they have designed and conducted a survey of needs, collated the data, and brainstormed activities based on the results. Long term goal – to have an information dissemination day at three public venues in Glenorchy. We are amassing a variety of information and resources and exploring and creating partnerships with health and human services providers in Glenorchy. The group is also focusing on ways of including practical and simple self care initiatives into their own lives: to alleviate the burden of being carers, managing chronic illness, anxiety, stress, depression, loneliness. Gently Doreen is encouraging group members to be more assiduous in self care, as a way of balancing out the huge output of energy to others that they are presently giving – they're all care givers and service oriented people, who often let their own needs go unmet ! - and of replenishing their energy and maintaining good health! A high level of trust is beginning to operate in the group: recently we have begun to incorporate creativity and fun into our meetings. We have a very healthy lunch together first of all, during which we have lively discussions, then some activity (these have included wax painting, postcard creation, hand massage, next week facials) then off to the Barn for Heart Moves together and then we finish up with afternoon tea. Lovely home baked goodies! This group grew up out of Heart Moves and the Heart Foundation sponsored walking group, and I think will become a vibrant and active community group: some of the members had never been to the community house before: now Doreen is recruiting them onto her board!

## **IN CONCLUSION**

There are of course many other areas of literacy that need to be explored and addressed – financial literacy, functional numeracy, cultural literacy, and I also find there is a very strong case to make for literacy of the heart and spirit, for both emotional and beauty literacy not to mention kindness literacy: the key to me is creativity, and as a long term community artist I find the arts have a lot to offer and a lot to teach in going about things in a productive way.

Behind the literacy project for me is a philosophical position that hold all lives valuable, and seeks to help people open up their worlds to joy and abundance.

The poet Lyn Lifshin wrote, 'only what can be used matters'. I agree. Much can be done by people of good will joining together, and by really listening and being ready to give and receive a hand: generally people know what they need: withholding one's professional opinion and expertise and choosing to go the learner-centred, learner-directed way, which is the model adult education is based on, pays dividends.

I'll end with a lovely anecdote: Bucaan House has set up a group for Bhutanese elders, whose health is not good: diabetes and heart disease abound: people are culturally and socially isolated, and are suffering from dislocation and grief at the loss of family and homelands. Their desire to learn to grow their own food and the joy of socialising came together in a recent outing to the Goodwood community garden and Pete's vegie plot at the Botanical Gardens, and then yesterday I met a woman who volunteered her peer educators to assist in helping people learn to grow food in Tasmanian conditions. I'd started that in a small way by giving people cuttings and providing seeds. Now it can grow into something bigger and more inclusive and expansive. Thank you. And a partnership is being forged with Reclink and DHHS Health Promotions personnel. But as this conversation continues something has been revealed that we Westerners might never have thought of: what these elders most yearn for in this new country is to touch a cow, spiritually a very significant animal in their culture. They were at a loss to know how to achieve this, located as they are in suburban areas and having no way to get to the country. Doreen and I put our heads together: we needed an extra bus to transport them, but where to find approachable cows! Community house staff to the rescue: yesterday I got an email from Jafar (West Winds project officer) saying he had teed it up with a friend of his who has a dairy farm, name, phone number and email contact supplied, and to come in October when the calves were at their cutest. The principle of mini-max; co-operation, community action. I like it.

I worked for a decade in indigenous tertiary education where two-way learning was the norm, the concept informed by a metaphor and a physical reality of Yolgnu (Top End) culture: different forms of water, apparently antithetical: the sea – salty and unbound, and fresh water in inland rivers and creeks. Then there is a third domain, neither one nor the other – tidal estuaries and coastal swamps where salt water meets fresh and intermingles: the space of new possibilities for crossing over and coming together. At the Bhutanese ceremony, Teej, I attended recently, I was reminded of this, as these apparently frail grieving elders appeared in a new light – as strong spirited ceremonial leaders and gracious hosts, offering hospitality and sharing their food and culture with strangers who are becoming friends. For in Benjafield Park, braving the cold blustery winds we were friends celebrating together, whether we spoke each other's languages or understood each other's ways: we were there together, enjoying and learning – members of one community.

I believe we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, and that everyone of us is entitled to respect and friendship and support and education, and that no one should be judged unworthy or consigned to the scrap heap. The adult literacy project is, I hope, one tiny manifestation of this belief. It is my strong belief that we are our brothers and sisters keepers, that none should be thrown on the scrap heap, none should be left lonely. The adult literacy project is just one tiny part of trying to make sure that doesn't happen, that each in their own way be able to live life to the fullest.