



I 23 BIG Mob!

‘Success breeds success. Indigenous workers provide models for others to follow... Negative stereotypes are replaced by success stories.’

—David Ross, Director, Central Land Council (p 9, NT Indigenous Economic Development Strategy).

by Angela Pattison and Rosemary Smith

Our aim as literacy and numeracy lecturers in the Darwin Correctional Centre is to sow the seeds for future success amongst our Indigenous students. Many, because of isolation and numerous other factors, do not have any opportunity outside of prison to access basic adult literacy and numeracy classes. We realise that although statistically the incidence of re-offending is quite high, with community support and a co-ordinated effort from all stakeholders we hope to see success begin to take hold and grow.

Background

There are three part-time literacy/numeracy lecturers currently working at Darwin Prison. Our contracts are part-time, ie four days a week, 30 hours in total. Sixteen of these are classroom contact hours and 14 are allocated administration time. We provide support to other industry lecturers and external providers.

Clients

‘... the Northern Territory’s Indigenous population suffers the highest levels of disadvantage across all social and economic indicators when compared to other States and Territories’. (p3, NT Indigenous Economic Development Strategy).

Over 95 per cent of our literacy and numeracy students are Indigenous. Many of these are assessed at NRS 1 (National Reporting System 1) or 1 NYA (1 Not Yet Achieved) and are representative of numerous remote NT and Islander/Queensland and WA communities. Those presenting lower literacy/numeracy levels require intensive, phonics focussed and base 10 number system sessions to assist them in developing the required whole language skills prior to or during their participation in other courses.

A mid-literate group consists of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students who have completed schooling from approximately Years 5/6 onwards. Some of these students have also attained reasonably proficient reading and writing skills from exposure to workplace numeracy and literacy experiences. Naturally, these students are able to meet unit competencies with more ease than those of a pre- to low-literacy level.

Students with low-level literacy and numeracy often present with other barriers to learning that may impact on their progress. From the initial assessment, we have found that many Indigenous students:

- Have little or no formal educational experience.
 - Do not speak English fluently. It is often their third or fourth language.
 - Do not gain employment after they leave school at an early age. (This may be due largely to a lack of employment opportunities in their own communities caused by isolation and remoteness and/or have not had the opportunity to develop a working knowledge of employability skills).
 - Have little hands-on industry experience and literacy skills, which impact on chances of employment.
 - Suffer from poor health due to the effects of drugs, alcohol and/or petrol sniffing.
 - Present with brain impairment, eye problems, long term diabetes or heart problems.
 - Have short term memory loss or have suffered behavioural problems as children.
 - Suffer childhood hearing loss which may in turn impair speech development.
- ‘One of the major problems in health is the ear

problem. ‘Otitis Media’, an infection of the middle ear, is a common ear condition. If children develop this problem in the first five years of their lives they will have trouble hearing all of their first language. This loss of first language makes literacy acquisition difficult because they do not have the basic foundations of their first language to build on’.

—Bridget Priman. (p.16 Literacy Link Feb 2004)

These findings are consistent with those of NT’s Indigenous Economic Development Strategy (IEDS), with particular reference to page 5 under ‘The Planning Context: Education’.

The cycle of imprisonment takes over and future directions become less clear. Because of their criminal background, students may have attitudinal factors that make learning difficult. These motivational factors also cause barriers to learning and need to be ‘worked through’ by the student and understood by the facilitator.

Training needs

Student training needs are determined through the following process:

1. A request from them to participate in education. This requires them to fill in a request form, which can be a daunting task for someone who finds writing difficult! More recently prisoners at the initial Classification interviews (within one month of sentence) are informed of Education courses and if interested are referred to the Senior Education Officer.
2. An ‘Orientation to Education’ session is carried out. This is in accordance to AQTF Standards 6 and 8 which state, that *as an RTO it is our duty to inform students of what takes place within the prison such as courses offered, the facilities provided and the lecturers involved.*



3. Students undertake Literacy and Numeracy Assessment as well as a Needs Analysis. During this session they provide background information for the Senior Education Officer on their education, employment and health. Courses they wish to pursue are also indicated.

4. They are then wait-listed in their course/s of choice.

The work completed during their literacy and numeracy assessment provides vital information to the lecturers about reading, writing and numeracy levels and any gaps that require addressing. This allows us to help them in developing a training pathway.

When a student's level of reading and writing is very low, it is strongly recommended that they attend literacy/numeracy classes. Their language requirements are mapped according to their chosen courses and life-skills needs and the relevant language elements, linguistic features and textual genres can be developed to prepare them for further study, work or daily life.

Training packages

In order to meet the literacy and numeracy educational/vocational demands of these groups, we have scope to deliver accredited training from:

- Certificates I & II in Spoken and Written English – 90993 & 90992 NSW.
- Prepare for Work – CHC10102.
- Access to Employment and Further Study – 70113 NT.

and other vocational courses where the student may or may not need literacy support.

External Registered Training Organisations such as NT Open Education Centre, Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, Charles Darwin University, SMIT etc are utilised and we support their students when required according to the literacy demands of the course.

Prison environment

Recommendation 45 of the CAYA report states:

'We recommend that targets for achieving literacy, numeracy, and English comprehension be established and the spaces to deliver the programs be provided'. ('A review of the Northern Correctional Services - Adult Custodial Operations - A Path to Good Corrections', March 2004)

We are one Registered Training Organisation, internally staffed and employed by the Depart-

ment of Justice but covering both Darwin and Alice Springs Prisons, a distance of approximately 1,500 kilometres apart! We are required to meet AQTF standards the same as any other RTO.

Alice Springs is a newer purpose-built prison, which is not only better planned but also has greater access to prisoners due to its longer structured day. Therefore it has a training facility that is better able to suit the needs of the prisoners they service.

Darwin Prison recently had a new upgrade in the Low Security area, which also allows for this longer access to prisoners. However, for the main part of the prison, lecturers and prisoners cannot access literacy and numeracy after 3.00pm until 9.00am the following day. Consequently, with regards to AQTF standards and the above recommendation, Darwin Prison is less able to function to its fullest capacity, because of its outmoded, pre-existing structures that lack resources and allow only limited access to prisoners.

Recommendation 47 from *'A Path to Good Corrections'* also states that:

'We recommend that programs be delivered on the evening shift as well as the day shift, with access expanded to a minimum of 3.5 hours in the morning, 3.5 hours in the afternoon, and two hours in the evening.'

Currently, we have been told that lecturers are unable to be employed as full-time permanent because of external funding arrangements; therefore our positions are set at part-time conditions. These conditions are not conducive to fulfilling Recommendation 47 nor do they assist in the long-term retention of a team of dedicated and experienced education staff.

The women, whose numbers are rarely above 36, are housed separately from the main prison, and only have access to literacy/numeracy classes once a week. This particular part of Darwin Correctional Centre was initially built as a pre-release centre but later converted to a section for female prisoners. It was never intended to be used to deliver educational programs.

Consistent, uninterrupted, regular sessions set aside for literacy and numeracy each day, using explicit teaching, would benefit our students. The Accelerated Literacy program is indicative of such a program.

Until such time that the above issues are addressed, Recommendation 47 cannot be fully implemented.

We at Education have strived to overcome these issues. This is reflected in the last two NCVER reports. These show that the NT Correctional Services Education Units have attained the highest participation levels out of all Australian jurisdictions. We feel there is little acknowledgement of our achievements when funding is reduced more each year resulting in the loss of positions and resources.

Conclusion

We feel that it is important for others to catch a glimpse of the difficulties we face at DCC, and understand how our work conditions in turn affect the quality of education for prisoners.

We also wish to have those in positions of management acknowledge the ground-level barriers that exist. We are committed to improving the current teaching/learning environment, as are any other teachers involved in adult Indigenous education. We particularly enjoy working with our client group and acknowledge that adult learning is a two-way process where we as teachers exchange ideas and value what people bring to the learning situation. (Rae Flanagan, 1997, FATSIS Seminar Series).

By sharing, we break down some of those invisible barriers of cultural backgrounds and lecturers vs student status... We are talking and learning together, not in isolation. (S. Brown., C. Nichols, 1997)

This article is a summary of a paper presented to the 2005 National Australian Correctional Education Association (ACEA) forum. A full copy of the paper, including a full list of references, is available on request from the authors.

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