

▶ ADULT LITERACY RESEARCH

Using information and communication technologies in adult literacy education: New practices, new challenges

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▶ **NEW INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES** (ICT), especially the internet, are changing literacy practices at an unprecedented rate. Literacies, as dynamic systems of social and cultural practice, are being transformed by technological change, electronic communication and the globalisation of knowledge. Once separate technologies are now converging, and as a result what counts as literacy has changed dramatically.

These technologies and their social consequences pose new questions for literacy educators. What is the relationship between literacy practice and the use of ICT in adult literacy education? What new literacies are required for effective use of ICT in adult literacy education? What changes to teaching/learning practice might be adopted when ICT are used in adult literacy programs? What are the professional development needs of literacy educators when planning to use ICT for teaching and learning?

▶ The research

A qualitative case study methodology was adopted to investigate these questions. Five registered training organisations across three states—two large public institutions, an enterprise registered training organisation and two community providers, one with an Indigenous education program—were chosen to represent a range of literacy programs. Data were collected over three months, using individual and group semi-structured interviews. At each site, participants were requested to keep a diary of one week's use of ICT.

▶ The findings

The research revealed a range of ICT practices among both educators and learners, with varying levels of skill and understanding. No participant's life was untouched by ICT: it was evident that the link between contemporary literacy practices and the use of ICT is inextricable. It makes little sense, therefore, to separate 'ICT' from 'literacy' and teach the use of ICT for literacy purposes as a discrete program.

Most educators in the study still thought in terms of the acquisition of ICT skills for academic or work purposes. By contrast, the experiences of most of the learners suggested the need for a broader view of the literacies required in adult education—in particular, the inclusion of ICT 'life skills', such as online banking and Internet searching for information.

The research found that although use and familiarity with ICT in work and personal life have increased dramatically, very little has changed in teaching literacy. Indeed, the way teachers and students use technology in their personal lives was more diverse than their experience in the classroom. Classroom use tended to involve an introduction to computer packages rather than learning the skills required for using ICT in everyday life.

▶ Implications for teaching practice

Teaching new literacies requires more sophisticated technical expertise and support than has ever been the case in adult literacy education. Educators require strong operational skills and access to high-quality, reliable equipment and technical support.



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There is a need to provide opportunities for all adult literacy educators to develop a confident, coherent and critical approach to including new literacies in their teaching practice.

Despite aspirations in some educational settings for wholly ICT-mediated instruction, the actions of teachers/trainers and other learners are still fundamental to effective teaching and learning in an ICT context.

Teachers' professional development is essential to promote understanding of the limitations as well as the benefits of using ICT. The informed use of ICT goes well beyond merely manipulating technologies to understanding how their use fits into social and economic relationships and purposes. As ICT skills pervade all contemporary teaching and learning, teachers need to consider how the use of ICT might be integrated into adult literacy education.

Finally, the researchers suggest that the integration of ICT and literacy requires a new approach, one not associated with the stigma of failure traditionally accompanying the term 'literacy'. Some participants in the study felt the negative associations with 'literacy' were so great that another term like 'communication' would better capture the complexity of contemporary screen-based reading and writing in a positive way.

The full report of *Using information and communication technologies in adult literacy education: New practices, new challenges*, by Ilana Snyder, Anne Jones and Joseph Lo Bianco, will be available from the NCVER website at <<http://www.ncver.edu.au>>.

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