



▶ ADULT LITERACY RESEARCH

What is all this learning for? Indigenous adult English literacy practices, training, community capacity and health

Inge Kral and Ian Falk

▶ **CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE** vocational education and training (VET) opportunities in remote Indigenous communities can give people the skills to be an active community participant. A key component of this is how adult literacy practices meet the needs of these communities.

This report studies the evolution of a Northern Territory community-controlled health service in the Sandover region among Alyawarr and Anmatyerr peoples. This involved an ethnographic investigation of adult literacy practices both in English and the local languages. It conducted interviews with community members and observers, everyday observations of community literacy practices, and an analysis of literary artefacts.

Western education and training has a short history in the region, because homeland school coverage was only achieved in 2003 and there are few texts in local languages. Local people have few job opportunities, although artwork is a major source of income. The community, having regained its lands, maintains coherent systems of law and culture.

The main interface with mainstream vocational education and training is the health service, particularly for those who undertake the Certificate III in Aboriginal Health Work. This training has, however, been affected by inconsistent planning.

The health service is developing a culturally appropriate training model which allows the community to identify the 'right person' culturally for the role. Younger trainees are mentored in the workplace culture, training is transparent, informal and flexible, and traditional community authority structures are reflected in the workplace.

Little teaching and learning of English literacy at home was observed. About 80% (39 out of 49) of interviewees had attended school and said they had English literacy. However, when assessed using the National Reporting System (NRS) as an indication of reading and writing competence, 50% of males and 40% of females were not yet competent at NRS Level 1.

About 50% of interviewees had participated in some form of adult literacy or training course, but few had further training aspirations.

The community is striving to maintain its Indigenous cultural heritage, and the health service is recognised as a site to extend its aspirations for education, training and employment.

The community is also dedicated to the process of developing a literate environment and the roles of 'literacy brokerage' and 'textual interpretation' have emerged. Not everybody has to be literate when key people act as brokers or mediators in identified sites for the less literate group.

Those who have moved in from other communities or engaged in lifelong learning tend to encourage literacy in others and practise it themselves. Such individuals are more likely to create, find or store written texts, and a general community transition to literacy would be aided by spreading these practices.

Literacy is more likely to be adopted if it is linked to cultural and religious activities, and community responsibilities that build 'social capital' of the communal whole. Social capital is the communal skills and networks that bind people together and makes them strong.



ADULT LITERACY RESEARCH

The health service represents a move towards 'cultural control' of employment and training, and similar trends exist in homeland schooling. The community is seeking a communitarian model of vocational education and training, which integrates both cultural values and competencies, and skills learnt from the mainstream schooling system.

These findings may not translate to all Indigenous contexts. However, they do suggest that vocational education and training in remote Indigenous communities must make allowances for the limited literacies of adults, who may speak English as a second, third or even fourth language.

► Messages for policy and practice

More attention should be given to community literacy activities in remote Indigenous communities. This could involve supporting 'family literacy' activities, professional development for 'literacy brokers', more homework centres, and developing strategies for Indigenous learning centres.

Everyday literacy practices should be encouraged in remote Indigenous communities, by making literacy materials available through the establishment of community libraries, and by increasing storage spaces for literacy materials.

There should be a thorough survey of Northern Territory Indigenous literacy, as well as research on the transferability of these findings and on the cross-cultural implications of social capital theory in Indigenous contexts.

Mainstream vocational education and training invests in preparing and developing individuals for employment. As the report title implies, literacy and training are only relevant for this community if they affirm socio-cultural roles and responsibilities.

Governments and training bodies should be encouraged to recognise and incorporate traditional law and authority structures in Indigenous communities.

Training and employment goals, as well as the Community Development Employment Program, should be incorporated into Indigenous community planning processes.

Local Indigenous cultural competencies and outcomes should be incorporated in education and training.

► Messages for trainers

Indigenous community members should be trained for meaningful activity that maintains the well-being of family and community. This could involve adult education courses in English language, literacy and numeracy, and in 'civic skills', both which can contribute to community life, lifelong learning, and employment.

There should be relevant on-site training, with trainers always ensuring that material is consistent with Indigenous community development plans.

Meaningful training pathways for required roles should be negotiated locally with Indigenous communities, not imposed from outside.

Trainers should customise training packages and assessment procedures so they are in line with the reality of the English language and literacy context in remote communities.

Community-based adult educators, and informal training and mentoring for non-accredited training, should be supported in Indigenous communities.

What is all this learning for? Indigenous adult English literacy practices, training, community capacity and health, by Inge Kral and Ian Falk, can be downloaded from the NCVER website at www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1476.html.