

# ▶ ADULT LITERACY RESEARCH

## Contradicting the stereotype: Case studies of success despite literacy difficulties

Peter Waterhouse and Crina Virgona

▶ **THE DISADVANTAGES** FACING individuals with poor verbal and reading skills are well documented. However, experience shows that many individuals in these circumstances lead successful lives—they secure satisfying employment, build businesses and function in society as citizens, partners and parents.

What personal attributes and skills allow some to succeed where many fail? Does a restrictive and overly scholastic approach to literacy prevent educators from appreciating the learning capacity of poor academic achievers? Likewise, have academic definitions of literacy blinded employers and the community to the wider range of skills the so-called 'non-literate' use in their work and life situations? Is there a need to rethink approaches which describe literacy abilities in terms of deficits? Do we fail to recognise 'para-literacy' skills, which help people to function effectively without conventional literacy attainment?

### ▶ The research

The research comprised a series of case studies with ten individuals who experience difficulties with the written word, but who have nevertheless achieved life success. The individuals' difficulties often emanate from a learning disability and their success has often been a struggle against adversity.

All participants are native English speakers and their literacy issues were verified by the researchers or through contact with adult literacy practitioners. The study set out to discover what works well in developing a balance of skills to enable successful functioning despite literacy difficulties.

In the case studies, indicators of success include economic independence, continuous employment, stable relationships, successful parenting and, in some instances, academic achievement, success in business, and wealth generation.

### ▶ The findings

Every person in the case study has experienced obstacles in their employment. Often they hide their literacy problems and withdraw from threatening situations. At other times they call on trusted support people or utilise the literacy resources of their work team. Two have confronted the problem by insisting on disability support systems, such as voice-activated software. Some have sought formal literacy training, which has not only improved skills, but reframed their experience by making them aware of the experiences of others.

The case study participants demonstrate personal resilience and an ability to separate their identity from the labels often applied to them. They have strongly developed skills in visual and experiential learning, creativity, problem-solving, and, for some, organisational management. All display para-literacy skills, such as recognition of key words and calculations, the capacity to 'read' the world, and use of audio-tape and other technologies.

Success is due to personal attributes of perseverance and resilience; access to supportive networks of family, friends and employers; and supportive technology, such as voice recognition.

These life stories emphasise the importance of accepting responsibility and taking control over one's own life. In some cases this may precede and facilitate powerful learning and development.

## ▶ Implications for policy

The idea of what being literate means needs to be broadened. Literacy, while important, is not the only criterion for personal, vocational or employment success. Personal attributes, and generic and employability related skills are also important. Diverse adult literacy approaches that develop learners' strengths and capabilities in other areas should be fostered.

Programs and support services should be expanded to include individuals with poor verbal and reading skills. Employers need programs and support to help them realise the mutual goals they share with 'illiterate' employees. Appropriate advice, resources and information should be provided to employers and educators to accommodate workers and learners who cannot easily decipher or produce text.

## ▶ Implications for teaching practice

Educators need to examine their often narrow view of what literacy is and understand how 'failing' to live up to these literacy expectations affects learners. Diagnostic-prescriptive approaches that focus on what people can't do are inappropriate. Instead, focusing on capabilities may assist learners to disconnect their sense of self-worth from their limited literacy achievement. This will help them to recognise achievement in other areas.

Trainers and educators need to recognise that literacy, while important, isn't everything. Recognising and legitimising other para-literacy skills will assist in building autonomy and independent learning.

The full report of *Contradicting the stereotype: Case studies of success despite literacy difficulties*, by Peter Waterhouse and Crina Virgona will be available from the NCVET website at <http://www.ncver.edu.au>.

April 2005