

From ‘empowerment’ to ‘compliance’: Neoliberalism and adult literacy provision in Australia

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Abstract

This article contrasts educational discourses and their associated policy and practice in the field of adult literacy in two sociopolitical eras in Australia: firstly, the social-democratic era that describes the beginnings of adult literacy as a distinct educational field from the late 1970s, and in particular the 1980s; and secondly, the neoliberal era that first strongly influenced the field from the early 1990s, and has reached its zenith in the contemporary state of the field. The terms ‘empowerment’ and ‘compliance’ are used in a reductionist way to describe the key discourses underpinning adult literacy provision in these two eras. The language of empowerment was popular with policy makers and literacy educators in the social-democratic era of free courses in a public education system. In the subsequent neoliberal era, while ‘compliance’ may not feature much in the language of policy makers and literacy educators, it nevertheless accurately describes the overarching process of what contemporary adult literacy provision does to teachers and students. In working towards nationally accredited curriculum outcomes, adult literacy educators and their students can be seen primarily to comply with the dominant industry and productivity agendas that underpin the curriculum. There are now few spaces for an empowering adult literacy education.

Keywords: *adult literacy, empowerment, Freire, neoliberalism, audit compliance*

Introduction

This article critically examines and contrasts two eras of adult literacy provision in Australia, beginning from the time the adult literacy field started to develop in the 1970s, and ending with the contemporary state of the field. The author has first-hand experience of much of the trajectory of the adult literacy field, first having worked in it as a literacy educator in prisons in 1980. Before detailing developments in the field, however, it is necessary to provide some early clarifications to this paper. Firstly, the concern is primarily with adults in the general community who wish to improve their reading and writing ability, and for many years have enrolled in literacy courses within the public vocational education and training (VET) system in Australia known as technical and further education (TAFE). As explained later, this process began from the mid-1970s, though initially more so in some state jurisdictions than others (Wickert and Zimmerman, 1991). Secondly, there is a greater focus on the most populous state, New South Wales (NSW), in part because since the formative years of adult literacy provision, NSW has had the most comprehensive and professionalised TAFE adult literacy provision. It is also the state institution where the author of this paper has extensive experience of working, initially from the mid-1980s as a literacy educator, and more recently following his retirement from TAFE, as an academic critiquing recent developments in the adult literacy field (e.g. Black, 2010; Black and Bee, 2017; Black and Yasukawa, 2016).

Another clarification is a focus primarily on what is termed the field of adult literacy, despite its many organisational and disciplinary evolutions since its beginnings in the 1970s. For example, in TAFE NSW from the late 1970s, adult

literacy programmes fell within the disciplinary area known as adult basic education (ABE), which included numeracy. In more recent years, the term 'foundation skills' has become more dominant, following the federal government's National Foundation Skills Strategy for adults (NFSS, see SCOTESE, 2012). Foundation skills are defined to include literacy, along with language and numeracy, and also a range of 'employability' skills. To maintain its historical continuity, the term adult literacy is used for the most part in this article. Many teachers in TAFE continue to refer to themselves as literacy teachers, even though the curriculum they teach is referred to as foundation skills.

The social-democratic era in the 1970s and 1980s – 'empowerment' policies and practices

There are a number of accounts of how the field of adult literacy in Australia has developed over time, which this article adds to, and provides a particular political perspective on. Dymock (1982), for example, documented the earliest era, and the field has since been documented nationally at various stages in its history (Wickert and Zimmermann, 1991; Wickert et al., 2007), and in various state-based histories (e.g. Campbell, 2010; Osmond, 2016). Invariably, these historical accounts of the field indicate its intertwining links with TAFE from the mid-1970s following reforms during the social democratic political era of Gough Whitlam's Labor government (1972-75). This was a time of considerable ferment politically, economically and socially, with the rise of liberation movements and the prevailing discourse of human rights in the Western world that provided fertile ground for concerns for adults who could not read (Osmond, 2016). Much of the early adult literacy provision was based on volunteer tutors working with individual students in an array of community-based organisations (Nelson, 1984), but reform of vocational education and the establishment of TAFE colleges throughout the country following the Kangan

Report (Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education, 1974), began the professionalisation and institutionalisation of adult literacy provision in Australia.

Kangan and social justice

The Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education chaired by Kangan, was established by Gough Whitlam's Labor government to reform vocational education in the interests of social justice - 'an educational and social brief to redress the disadvantaging impact of class and poverty' (Clemans and Seddon, 2000:117). The Kangan Report was grounded in the prevailing concept of recurrent education, and it meant that in addition to focusing on developing vocational skills (referred to by Kangan as the 'manpower orientation'), TAFE would have an 'educational and social purpose' reflected in an adult education orientation. In practical terms, the Kangan reforms provided what is sometimes known as 'second-chance' education to many adults and young people as a way of compensating them for previous failure and/or disadvantage in the school system. All TAFE courses following the Kangan Report were fee-exempt, thus eliminating cost as a barrier to participation. TAFE incorporated the principles of 'access and equity' with a focus on the active engagement of the whole range of disadvantaged groups, including early school leavers, women, migrants, the disabled, Aborigines and working class people generally (McIntyre, 1991). This was the environment in which adult literacy courses were quickly established and grew exponentially. By the mid-1980s, adult literacy provision as part of ABE within TAFE NSW was seen as a 'growth business' (Rustomje and Dent, 1986).

The early days and the influence of Freire

Adult literacy as a nationally distinct and recognised educational field began effectively with the formation of the Australian Council for Adult Literacy

(ACAL) in 1976, and the executive involved elected representatives from each state and territory. The first national ACAL conference was held in Canberra in 1977, and ACAL continues to this day to provide annual national conferences, with the latest 40th anniversary conference being held in Darwin. In that first conference, however, there were clear tensions between those advocating centralisation and curriculum control, and those advocating greater diversity, self-management and a more 'open' approach to pedagogy (Nelson, 1984).

From its earliest days, ACAL produced a regular newsletter, *Literacy Link*, which provides a detailed picture of how the field has developed over time. The earliest editions necessarily reflected the concerns of a beginning field trying to establish itself locally and nationally. For example, there was a focus on developing materials and resources for use by volunteer tutors, on spelling and writing techniques and hints, on various state initiatives, and a strong focus on the students themselves (adult literacy conferences in these times often included a separate student strand including student writing, and there were even separate state student conferences). From the early 1980s, a number of *Literacy Link* articles featured the work of Paulo Freire (for example, 'Interview with Paulo Freire' [Costigan, 1981], 'Freire for Australia' [Costigan, 1982], 'The work of Paulo Freire in relation to some issues in library outreach' [Modra, 1982]). It was clear from these articles, and others written by leading adult literacy educators in the mid-1980s, that the burgeoning field of adult literacy acknowledged a debt to Freirean philosophy. For example, at a workshop held at the University of New England in 1985, at which leading adult literacy educators in Australia and some key overseas speakers were invited to participate (Nelson and Dymock, 1986), Arch Nelson, then Chair of ACAL, drew heavily on Freirean philosophy and practices to justify community development approaches to adult literacy provision (Nelson, 1986). At the same workshop, Kath White (1986), a leading figure in adult literacy in NSW,

similarly indicated the influence of Freire on adult literacy practice in Australia. It was in Melbourne and Victoria more generally, however, that Freire's influence was most significant, due in part to Freire's visit to Melbourne in 1974 as a speaker at a World Council of Churches seminar. White (1986:35) referred to an early report of the Victorian Council of Adult Education (CAE) and its extensive volunteer-based adult literacy programme, which stated that the CAE programme was 'not simply to provide skills to cope with everyday life but to enable people to gain greater freedom to make choices'. Thus, the CAE programme was about educational reform and social change (Council of Adult Education, 1974). The coordinator of the CAE at the time, Dominica Nelson, later stated explicitly that the programme 'is sustained by Freirean philosophy and is committed to the notion of the empowerment of people to act and take responsibility for their lives' (Nelson, 1984:35).

Empowerment and rights

It was clear from the above accounts and others that Freirean concepts of empowerment held some sway within the field, and even with the occasional member of the political class. At the 1984 national conference of ACAL held in Melbourne, the invited plenary speaker, the Victorian state parliamentarian Joan Kirner, who later became the State Premier (1990-92), referred to Freire's understandings of empowerment, dialogue between students and teachers, and equality. She stated: 'Freire saw literacy as a weapon to be used in the transfer of power from the powerful well-resourced few to the disempowered under-resourced many – the working class. I share his view' (Kirner, 1984:12). In recent times, 'empowerment' has become a highly contested academic concept (e.g. Galloway, 2015), and as some researchers indicated more than two decades ago, the term no longer means what it once did, having become colonised by industry and business groups as a 'fast capitalist text' (Gee et al., 1996:29). In the 1980s, however, there appeared little contention over what

empowerment meant to adult literacy teachers and their students, and the term 'belongs to this era of pedagogy' (Campbell, 2010:141). It was, nevertheless, a construct that applied essentially to individuals, not oppressed groups or communities as with Freire, and this was due in large part to the discourse of individualism that underpinned volunteer adult literacy tutoring and much of the one-to-one and small group provision in the expanding TAFE provision. White (1983:118) characterised the central tenet of adult literacy pedagogy at the time as the 'primacy of the individual.'

In ACAL papers and other research studies in the mid-1980s, there were many accounts of the complex and disadvantaged lives of individual adult literacy students and the role of tutors and teachers in helping to empower and transform these students (e.g. Grant, 1985; Waterhouse, 1985). It was at the height of this era that Audrey Grant (1987) published a research report entitled: '*Opportunity to do brilliantly: TAFE and the challenge of adult literacy provision in Australia*'. Such was the optimism of the field at the time, and the perceived role of public education in promoting adult literacy for empowerment. Much of the empowerment discourse was linked with the growth in individual self-confidence that resulted from adult literacy provision, and it was common-place and predictable for adult literacy tutors and teachers to rate individual student gains in self-confidence over and above any gains in the technical (cognitive) skills of reading and writing (Charnley and Jones, 1980; Brennan et al., 1989).

The discourse of individual student empowerment in the 1970s and 1980s was closely related to the idea of literacy as a 'right'. As indicated earlier, this was an era of liberation movements and human rights, and literacy rated highly as one such right. In the UK in the early 1970s, there was the celebrated 'right to read' campaign by the BBC (Hargreaves, 1977), which established adult literacy as a national concern in the UK, and which initially encouraged many

adult literacy initiatives in Australia. The 1982 national ACAL conference in Hobart had the theme *Literacy – a right not a privilege* (deliberate spelling). At the University of New England workshop in 1985 referred to earlier (Nelson and Dymock, 1986), the participants formulated a series of recommendations (47 in total) for the further development of the field of adult literacy, and the first three recommendations related to ‘rights’: that Commonwealth and State/Territory governments guarantee the right to literacy for Australian residents; that governments act on the Right to Learn Declaration by UNESCO in 1985; and that all concerned recognise the individual learner’s right to share in decision-making about their own learning programmes (Nelson and Dymock, 1986:viii). ACAL (1989) also focused on rights when it articulated its principles and practices, including: ‘All adults in Australia have the right of equal opportunity to meet their individual ongoing needs in adult literacy and basic education programmes’, and ‘All adults who need literacy and basic education have a right of access to appropriate programmes free of charge’. By this time in the late 1980s, however, it was becoming clear that government policy increasingly paid little heed to such rights.

Freire in action

Despite the inspiration of Freire’s empowerment concept in the 1980s, as expressed by some leading adult literacy educators, the extent to which Freirean philosophy influenced pedagogical practices more generally in adult literacy programmes is contestable, and there are relatively few documented examples of Freire in action in Australian adult literacy pedagogy. Sanguinetti (1992) explored some issues involving Freirean pedagogy and the professional development of teachers, but as Lee and Wickert (1995) noted, writing reflectively of the discourses of adult literacy teaching in Australia, there was little evidence of emancipatory/liberationist discourses. An exception, however, was the work of Barbara Bee (1990, 1993, 2014). In the following paragraphs,

Barbara outlines how she incorporated Freirean principles in the early 1980s while working with a group of immigrant women in a TAFE programme located in a working class suburb of Sydney:

What Freire's philosophy and pedagogy enabled me to grasp, was to make knowledge student-centred, content- and context-related. It had to emerge from the women's cultural and social backgrounds, abilities, needs and experiences. But most importantly, as far as I understood, if I wanted the students to begin speaking and contributing they needed to feel they were in a safe place and could risk speaking, however hesitantly to begin with, about their lives and needs. My role was not to be one of an expert who knew the answers to their enquiries, but rather to reflect back to them what they thought and felt as individuals in their own right, but also as women in the broader gendered context. The women would become the subject matter of their learning expressed in words and themes to which they could relate and consider ...

I could not have predicted what a rich harvest of generative themes and words familiar to these women – mother, wife, daughter, sister, woman, worker, would be called into being. Gradually, but with growing awareness and confidence, my students broke their silences, found their voices, talked, shared and listened to others in respectful silence, followed by discussion, agreement and sometimes dissension from opinions expressed. (Bee, 2014:104-105).

TAFE provision in the social democratic era

As indicated, while Freirean ideas played at least an inspirational role in the adult literacy field, especially in relation to understandings of student empowerment, there is relatively little documented evidence, beyond the work of Bee, of the implementation of Freirean pedagogical practices more generally. Rather, as Lee and Wickert (1995) in their study of adult literacy discourses explained, adult literacy pedagogy from its beginnings in the 1970s/1980s was undertaken in a largely humanist and liberal-progressive tradition (Black and Bee, forthcoming). While there was a strong focus on student-centred,

negotiated learning based on the lived experiences of the student, it was not necessarily learning that involved broader social critique, which we often refer to as critical literacy (e.g. Lankshear and McLaren, 1993). After all, as Sanguinetti (1992:42) noted, it was problematic to expect ‘a comfortably middle class teacher’ to be aligned fully with the issues confronting their marginalised students (see also Black and Bee, 2017). So while Freire was often invoked, in the classroom it was often a sanitized version with reduced revolutionary zeal. But notwithstanding the political dimension, the common feature of all adult literacy pedagogy at the time was belief that it was empowering for individual students, and this was encouraged in TAFE provision by the socio-political reforms of the mid-1970s. It was the Kangan reforms that enabled TAFE to focus on access and equity and to provide programmes that targeted various disadvantaged individuals and communities. And it was not just that TAFE could be accessed by disadvantaged people through the provision of equity programmes with no fees, but that TAFE actively targeted these groups, in some cases with educators ‘door knocking’ in public housing estates to determine the educational needs of local community members and to encourage their participation (Bee, 2014). This was indeed an era in which TAFE was striving to meet the educational needs of local, working class communities, and TAFE adult literacy programmes, at least in the major metropolitan areas, often featured extensive waiting lists as demand for places in literacy related courses far exceeded supply.

The pedagogical context of TAFE provision was geared to a student empowerment and rights agenda. Throughout the 1980s, the main form of adult literacy provision in TAFE NSW comprised small group tuition in a course known as RAWFA (Reading and writing for adults). Statewide TAFE regulations stipulated a 6:1 ratio of students to teachers, and there was also one-to-one provision available for students, who, usually for various emotional and

dispositional reasons associated with previous schooling failure, were considered to be in need of more individualised teaching. Essentially, there was no curriculum insofar as student learning goals were to be jointly negotiated between students and teachers. White (1983:118) encapsulated the prevailing pedagogical principles in her argument for the 'primacy of the individual':

The individual student's perceptions, needs, aspirations, and learning style should determine the type of tuition s/he receives, rather than any pre-conceived notions of ideal educational content and delivery. This includes respect for the student's right to share in decision-making about his/her educational future.

Consistent with these principles, there was no standardised or formal assessment of an individual's literacy abilities, either upon entry to adult literacy provision, or to measure progress within it. For most in the adult literacy field during the 1980s, the very definition of literacy and what it meant to individual students was subjective, and provision was based on whether individuals felt they had a literacy problem in their adult lives (Charnley and Jones, 1980).

Some early misgivings about TAFE provision

Despite the massive growth in TAFE adult literacy provision in the early 1980s, there were some prominent adult literacy educators who had doubts that the more formalised and professionalised TAFE adult literacy provision was the way forward for the adult literacy field. Dominica Nelson (1984) for example, a strong Freirean educator, and a promoter of volunteer community-based learning centres in and around Melbourne, suggested the need to 'de-school' adult literacy provision because it had become too bureaucratised to meet the needs of many disadvantaged groups. Kath White, another strong promoter of volunteer tutors, expressed doubts that more accredited and professionalised

teachers of adult literacy would have the ‘humility of spirit’ to identify with the poorest in society. She argued, drawing on Freirean concepts, that on the basis of their qualifications, teachers believed they alone had the right to determine student needs and accomplishments, and thus their pedagogy more closely resembled Freire’s banking concept than an ‘authentic education’ in which the educational partners are ‘sometimes learner, sometimes teacher’ (White, 1986:36). Bee’s (1990, 1993, 2014) pedagogy effectively represented a counter to this perspective, but as indicated earlier, it was likely to be one of the exceptions. Moreover, in the latter part of the 1980s, TAFE NSW adult literacy provision began to shift away from its ‘primacy of the individual’ principles of negotiated learning in small group and individualised programmes, with the introduction of an accredited certificate course in adult basic education (CABE) with a centralised, state-based curriculum and higher student/teacher ratios (15:1). Thus, towards the end of the 1980s, those tensions apparent from the very first conference of ACAL in 1977, had been largely played out, and advocates of greater centralisation and curriculum control were on the ascendancy. On the horizon, however, were storm clouds of far greater magnitude as neoliberal ideology began to be reflected strongly in government policy on education.

The turning point – the early impact of neoliberal ideology

This article does not aim to provide a comprehensive history of adult literacy provision in Australia, rather, it aims to contrast policy and provision in two socio-political eras. It is, however, important to indicate when and how the shift from an essentially social-democratic era to a neoliberal era occurred. In this section, an overview is provided of some of the significant events and milestones from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, referred to in one study as the ‘middle era’ (Wickert et al., 2007:270), to indicate their significance for the field of adult literacy.

The first signs

The adult literacy field was first alerted to a direct challenge to its prevailing principles and beliefs (i.e. empowerment, rights) when Lo Bianco, author of the recent National Policy on Languages (Lo Bianco, 1987a), presented the plenary address at the 1987 national ACAL conference in Perth. In it he stated:

One of the most common predictable experiences related by adult literacy personnel is about the empowerment which literacy can bring to individual students ... You will all know better than I do of the many life-transforming cases of your work. For the individual concerned certainly, and probably for the rest of us today, this would constitute sufficient justification for claiming public resources for adult literacy. My last point today, however, is to say to you that it isn't. In more powerful places it simply is not sufficient justification. (Lo Bianco, 1987b)

Lo Bianco then went on to explain the economic case for language and literacy; that they were indispensable and a pre-requisite for most new work. Within the space of the next few years, there were radical changes to the political and socio-economic milieu that would significantly change both TAFE and the field of adult literacy in Australia.

International competitiveness, skills, national reforms and VET

1987 was a prescient year, with major federal government and union reports (Dawkins and Holding, 1987; ACTU/TDC, 1987) promoting a new national focus on skills formation with the stated aim of enabling the nation to become more economically productive, efficient, and internationally competitive. It was market forces associated with globalisation, and fears of Australia being left behind economically with the prospect of high unemployment and reduced living standards, that led to an upsurge in neoliberal policies for industry and training reform promoted and supported by all elite groups – governments,

unions and business/industry, working together with relative unity. These reforms under the federal Australian Labor Party in the late 1980s and early 1990s, known generally as the National Training Reform Agenda, began with changing industrial relations (award restructuring), and led to VET reforms designed to make training more responsive to the needs of industry (i.e. an ‘industry-led’ system). These reforms included national frameworks for the recognition and accreditation of skills, an Australian Standards Framework of qualifications, national training curricula based on industry competencies (later codified into training packages for each industry group), and ‘market-driven’ training that was to be ‘open and competitive’ based on the prevailing elite group view that publicly funded training ‘had not measured up to requirements’ (see Hall, 1995:90).

It was not just the TAFE/VET market that was being reformed, but education generally in Australia. Lingard (1991) referred to these neoliberal educational reforms as ‘corporate federalism’, which involved the alignment of dominant elite group interests in a range of national educational policies predicated by national economic interests. Lingard (1991:86) argued that corporate federalism was framed by a number of discourses and practices, including: ‘neo-corporatism’ – the tendency for elite groups to work together to determine key areas of economic policy; ‘economic rationalism’ - the focus on efficiency and effectiveness; ‘corporate managerialism’ – the application of economic rationalism in public sector bureaucracies; and ‘reconstituted human capital theory’ - where education and skills are seen primarily for their economic benefits. One educational researcher at the time commented that these new alliances between education and industry resulted in educational policies that ‘serve the needs of business and the economy. The value of education is reduced to economic utility. Skills that are not seen to be of economic importance are devalued’ (Sachs, 1991:127).

Literacy as human capital

The field of adult literacy, even allowing for its burgeoning growth in TAFE in the 1980s, was a relative minnow compared to school education and the higher education sector generally, but this new economic reform era had the potential to elevate adult literacy, now viewed conceptually as human capital, into national significance. Coincidentally, 1990 was International Literacy Year (ILY), and it provided the federal government and other elite groups the opportunity to highlight on the national stage, the new significance of literacy. For example, in an ILY publication aptly entitled *Literacy training: The key to long term productivity*, Dawkins, the Minister for the new federal Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET), stated: 'For Australians, literacy is the difference between competing in the international market with a well-trained workforce – and stagnation' (ILY, 1991). With this new-found national status, in the space of just a few years some key stakeholders began to perceive that the field of adult literacy had shifted from 'marginal status to centre stage' (Black, 1990). Policy activists from within the field, and especially within ACAL, adopted a 'deliberate strategy' to align adult literacy with the new skills formation agenda which was in the early stages of being promoted internationally by the OECD (Wickert, 2001:78). In a portend of things to come, the OECD (1992) published its first major report linking literacy (illiteracy) with economic performance (the role of the OECD is discussed later in this article).

Official recognition and promotion of the new significance of literacy as human capital came with the federal government's Australian Language and Literacy Policy (ALLP, see DEET, 1991; Lo Bianco and Wickert, 2001). This policy was a key element of 'corporate federalism' outlined earlier, and it stressed 'shared responsibility' and 'national consensus' involving federal and state

governments, business and industry groups, the private sector and others. That the ALLP was primarily a response to national economics was clearly indicated on page one of the policy document which stated: ‘Global economic forces are demanding changes in the structure of Australian industry, in our ability to compete in world markets, and in our readiness to adapt to new jobs ...’ (DEET, 1991:1). In its promotion of the ALLP, the federal government indicated that improving the literacy (and language) skills of Australian was ‘just like farmland or goldmines, we can use them to help our country grow and prosper into the 21st century’ (DEET, 1992:1, see also Wickert and Baynham, 1994). The most significant tangible outcome of the ALLP for adult literacy provision, apart from a few years of national professional development funding, was specific federal funding for workplace literacy programmes and for jobseekers, the new euphemism for the unemployed. These programmes have comprised the two pillars of federal government funding for adult literacy from the time of the ALLP in 1991 to the present day (though workplace literacy programme funding was discontinued in 2014).

Towards competency-based, nationally accredited curricula

The ALLP and its aftermath provided key players in the adult literacy field with a ‘not-to-be missed opportunity to consolidate the place of adult literacy and numeracy in national mainstream policy priorities for economic, industry, training, and welfare reform’ (Wickert et al., 2007:256). In particular, these players included managers and bureaucrats in the state TAFE systems, and considerable federal government funding, mainly for workplace training and jobseekers, was now available in the newly contestable training market for organisations that were compliant with the new national training reform agenda. In the early 1990s, these state bureaucrats ‘threw themselves into the task of developing competency-based curricula and getting them onto a national register of approved, accredited literacy and numeracy courses to be eligible for

Commonwealth funding' (Wickert et al., 2007:257). A key milestone in the development of competency-based, accredited curricula was the development of a National Framework of Adult English Language, Literacy and Numeracy Competence (ACTRAC, 1993), followed a couple of years later with the highly significant National Reporting System (NRS, see Coates et al., 1995) that incorporated this competency framework.

In the early 1990s, there was little documented opposition to these training reforms, including by teachers, in part because at this stage their pedagogical interests were not threatened directly as provision had simply expanded to include workplace and jobseeker programmes. There was at this time a 'duality' of discourses for adult literacy work – social justice and economic, and both funded by governments (Sanguinetti, 2007). Teachers' opinions were also largely unheard because, as Lo Bianco (1991) pointed out, most worked from within a professional culture that now held little sway with neoliberal policymakers/bureaucrats. Adult literacy teachers were concerned primarily with literacy as a 'right', but increasingly government bureaucrats were concerned only with literacy as 'resource'. At the time one of the few documented critiques from the field was Gribble (1990), a leading Victorian educator, who suggested the need to 'resist hijack and seduction' by the industrial agenda. Some critique also came from outsiders to Australian adult literacy. A visiting Freirean academic from the University of Massachusetts, Elsa Auerbach (1994), warned strongly against competency-based literacy education at the 1994 national ACAL conference. Auerbach (1994:12) drew attention to the ideological tightrope that was being walked by various stakeholders with contending belief systems, and the possibility of competency-based literacy education turning into a mechanism of social control. She indicated the 'very real danger' that teachers:

will be positioned as agents in the production of a redefined workforce. There will be enormous pressure to transform you into technocrats, diminishing your autonomy in the classroom and articulating you into externally defined systems of standards and competence.

In light of developments in adult literacy policy and practice in the years and decades that followed, these comments were prophetic, but at the time they were ignored by state bureaucrats and leading adult literacy educators who were determined to make the most of the ‘not-to-be-missed’ opportunities for locking adult literacy into national VET reforms. One year after Auerbach’s comments, at the next national ACAL conference in 1995, the new competency-based National Reporting System (NRS) was introduced to the field by leading state bureaucrats (Coates, 1995). Other leading bureaucrats at the same conference lauded the recent training reforms, including the move to competency standards and a competitive training market (Persson, 1995). One of the few notes of caution at the conference came from another ‘outsider’, Canadian academic, Nancy Jackson (1995), who critiqued competence and the neoliberal concept of ‘quality systems’ that was being introduced to public sector management. By 1995, however, the adult literacy field was firmly locked into a dominant economic reform trajectory in tandem with VET and with little opportunity for deviation.

State politics and the New Right

While these far-reaching federal reforms were in progress with little resistance from rank and file TAFE adult literacy teachers, it was the neoliberal politics of a New Right government at the state level from 1988 that forced them, along with a considerable number of other teachers from TAFE NSW and schools, to become activists in defence of their social democratic educational beliefs. In NSW in 1988, the conservative Greiner Coalition government (i.e. Liberal/

National Party) came to power after 12 years of Labour government, and educators were immediately met with a series of neoliberal educational reforms that brought 'massive demonstrations in the streets of Sydney' (Clark, 2003: 50). The Greiner government, with its Minister for Education, Metherell, set about winding back the social-democratic reforms of the Whitlam era, attacking what they termed the 'quasi-welfare' role of TAFE, which they claimed had taken precedence over the needs of industry (Scott, 1990; Powles and Anderson, 1996:100). The immediate impact for the adult literacy field was budget cuts, the forced closure of women's and other equity units in TAFE, and the imposition of course fees (which union and professional association lobbying from within the adult literacy field successfully reversed). The subsequent Scott Review (1990) of TAFE NSW, with its major organisational restructuring, including industry training divisions replacing the traditional teaching schools, represented a significant shift from TAFE as a public educational institution to a marketised TAFE oriented primarily towards economic utility (Clark, 2003; Powles and Anderson, 1996).

Losing power over the literacy agenda

Writing in the early 1990s as the national training reforms first began to unfold and literacy assumed elevated status as human capital, Wickert (1991), a literacy academic and policy activist, wrote of the need for the adult literacy field to 'maintain power over the literacy agenda'. To do so, she pointed to the need for literacy educators and bureaucrats to reflect critically on the discourses and ideologies underpinning the dominant literacy policy texts of the New Right. By the late 1990s, however, it was clear that governments and other elite groups would shape the literacy agenda regardless of what adult literacy professionals might think. A revised federal government literacy programme targeting the unemployed and using (mis-using?) the National Reporting System (NRS), provided a case in point. Wickert (1998:66) in a later paper

described this programme as follows: ‘Funds are won by tender, payment is by results, and will be based on demonstrated progress against the NRS ...’ When bureaucrats and educators from within the literacy field produced a detailed and complex NRS with federal government funding in 1995, it was never their understanding that it would subsequently be simplified for pre- and post-training testing for a mandatory programme for unemployed people. This was confirmation of the warning Auerbach (1994:6) provided a few years before in her 1994 ACAL address, that a competency framework could become a mechanism for social control ‘despite the best intentions of its framers’. The programme for the unemployed contravened established good practice in adult literacy provision on many levels and brought forth the comment by Wickert (1998:71) that ‘who wouldn’t teach to the levels of the National Reporting System if that is the basis for funding’. Despite this subversion of adult literacy provision in government jobseeker programmes, Wickert (1998) remained optimistic for the adult literacy field based on its ability to attract more government funding and its incorporation of more sites of practice, and she argued the field needed to maintain a voice. Other literacy commentators at the time, however, seemed less optimistic about how the field of adult literacy was changing (Lo Bianco, 1997).

The compliance era - Neoliberalism in full flight

Beginning with the training reforms of the early 1990s, neoliberal policies have increasingly impacted on the adult literacy field, and have been termed in this article, the ‘compliance era’, which has reached its zenith in the past decade. This era could not be more different from the first ‘social democratic’ decade that began with the first ACAL conference in 1977. In fact, such was the pace of reform in the early 1990s, that by the late 1990s, the adult literacy field had already become ‘unrecognisable to those who knew it before’ (Wickert,

1997:35), and the field was then only at the mid-point of its history with another two decades of neoliberalism still to go.

Foundation skills and the employability agenda

One key difference between then and now involves nomenclature – the naming of the field and the implications this has, because in the contemporary era it is difficult to identify a distinct field of adult literacy. While literacy remains in the name of the now four-decades-old peak professional association, the Australian Council for Adult Literacy (ACAL), the national focus has shifted to the broader concept of 'foundation skills' following the the federal government's National Foundation Skills Strategy for adults (NFSS, see SCOTESE, 2012). Importantly, foundation skills incorporate not only literacy (and language and numeracy), but a range of 'employability' skills, and it is now common to find former ABE sections in TAFE NSW named 'Foundation Skills', or variants such as 'Adult Foundation Education' or even 'Preparation for Work'. This link to employability is significant and demonstrates the extent to which the literacy agenda has shifted away from social justice and towards the economy. With the incorporation of employability, the NFSS essentially culminated the adult literacy field's journey since the early 1990s of acquiescence to the business and industry agenda.

Along with the development of the NFSS, the federal government funded the development of an employability framework, the Core Skills for Work (Ithaca Group, 2013), which built on one developed by peak business groups a decade earlier. Thus, the adult literacy (i.e. foundation skills) field now has two national standardised frameworks of competencies which are used to assess and measure students (now often referred to as 'clients'): the more recent Core Skills for Work (CSF), and the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF), formerly known as the National Reporting System, but revised in 2008 to become the

ACSF (see Brewer et al., 2008). The ACSF in particular, as with its predecessor the NRS, is seen by the federal government to play a significant role in ensuring national consistency in reporting and assessment across contemporary adult literacy provision (see <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-core-skills-framework>). The ACSF basically defines what literacy (and numeracy) means for teachers, because, as we have seen, federal government funding is dependent on students demonstrating competence across the ACSF levels. Thus, for teachers concerned to maintain federal government funding for their programmes, literacy is narrowly focused on the competences that the ACSF measures. The ACSF can also be viewed primarily as a mechanism of compliance with the national agendas of ruling groups - governments and business/industry, and in recent times it has become linked with ruling interests at the macro, international level involving the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

The OECD and Australian adult literacy policy and practice

The first official indication of the OECD's interest in adult literacy and economics came with a publication that coincided with Australia's skills and training reform 'take-off' in the early 1990s (OECD, 1992). Since that time, the OECD has increasingly had an influence on adult literacy policy and practice, not only in Australia, but in many Western nations, mainly through its international adult literacy surveys (Hamilton et al., 2015). Through the collaborative work of the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), Australia has been a participating country in these international surveys, with reports of Australian findings published by the ABS in 1997, 2008 and 2013. While the first of these surveys had little policy impact, the second, the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALLS), had a major impact. It would be no exaggeration to state that the NFSS would have been unlikely without the ALLS data, because the survey results provided the prime evidence-base on which to argue the case

for improving the literacy and numeracy skills of Australian adults. The ALLS results, for example, enabled the NFSS to make the claim that: 'More than 7.5 million Australian adults do not have the literacy and numeracy skills needed to participate fully in today's workforce' (SCOTESE, 2012:i). Almost exclusively, the industry and skills reports cited in the NFSS used the ALLS data to demonstrate there was an adult literacy 'crisis' that demanded government action in the form of the NFSS (Black and Yasukawa, 2016).

The OECD is the world's leading think-tank on economic development and strongly promotes the concept of literacy as human capital (e.g. Coulombe et al., 2004). Ideologically, with its 'neoliberal tint' (Rubenson, 2015:189), it wields considerable international power and influence in educational matters through its international comparative skills surveys, and also through its 'soft power' i.e. 'its creation of epistemic communities of policy analysts, bureaucrats and politicians within the Organisation and in member countries' (Sellar and Lingard, 2013:712). In effect, OECD ideas and policies on education have become the taken-for-granted 'common sense' (Rubenson, 2015). In Australian policy documents, and in particular the NFSS, OECD definitions of literacy and numeracy are adopted without question, as is the adoption of a criterion level of skills (Level 3) that the OECD deems is the minimum level that enables people to function in society (ABS, 2008:5. See critique by Black and Yasukawa, 2014). As a consequence, current federal government policy on foundation skills is based on OECD constructs with the stated aim that 'by 2022, two thirds of working age Australians will have literacy and numeracy skills at Level 3 or above ...' (see <https://www.education.gov.au/national-foundation-skills-strategy-adults>). And given that the current standardised literacy and numeracy assessment tool, the ACSF, was constructed according to a different set of criteria, the federal government funded a project designed to 'map' the ACSF levels of competency with the OECD's levels (Circelli et al.,

2013). Henceforth, the widely used ACSF assessment tool can be related directly with OECD measures, and thus, as is the case with other Western nations (e.g. Pinsent-Johnson, 2015 in relation to Canada), pedagogy and curriculum in adult literacy classrooms can be seen to comply with OECD standards and norms.

Policy entrepreneurs

In the previous eras of adult literacy provision in the 1980s, and for most of the ‘middle era’ in the 1990s, expertise in the field was sought largely from where most of the provision was found, in state TAFE systems, and also in some higher education institutions. From the mid-2000s this changed as neoliberal ‘market-driven’ ideology started to take full effect with the privatisation agenda, and the federal government chose to fund mainly private consultants in the process of formulating, recommending, and implementing important reforms in Australian adult literacy policy and practice. The development of the key assessment tool, the ACSF, provides a clear example of this trajectory from public to private. The original National Reporting System was compiled mainly by literacy experts within state education bureaucracies (Coates et al., 1995), but following recommendations in a nationally commissioned report by a private consultant (Perkins, 2005), the revised version in 2008, now re-named the ACSF, was compiled by a group of five private consultants (Brewer et al., 2008), and further revisions since then have been compiled by some of the same private consultants, plus others (McLean et al., 2012, McLean et al., 2017). With ongoing federal government funding, private consultants have continued to play the leading role in implementing the ACSF around the country with professional development activities, products and other services (for example, see consultancy websites for *Linda Wyse & Associates*, *Escalier McLean Consulting*, and *Precision Consulting*).

In addition to the ACSF, in the period leading to the current national strategy on foundation skills (NFSS), private consultants commissioned with federal government funding played a key role in producing reports that framed the policy issues and made recommendations for reform (Perkins, 2009; Roberts and Wignall, 2010a, 2010b). Follow up studies on employability (i.e. Core Skills for Work, see Ithaca Group, 2013), and also work on the priority areas of the implementation of the strategy, similarly involved key private consultants (Wignall Consulting Services, 2017). Thus, the ACSF, the current mandatory assessment tool in accredited adult literacy provision in Australia, and the current national strategy and associated projects, are all predominantly the result of private consultancy work funded by the federal government. And given the location of most of these consultants, there appears some irony that Melbourne, with its Freirean traditions dating from the early 1970s, should have become the centre for privatised expertise in the field of adult literacy in the contemporary era.

Promotion of adult literacy policy and practice reform in recent years has also been influenced by major industry groups, skills and 'testing' organisations. In particular, the federal government has relied extensively on the Australian Industry Group due to its influential national voice, granting it major funding for workplace literacy projects (e.g. AIG, 2010, 2012). The AIG website (<https://www.aigroup.com.au/>) states that it is the nation's 'only *truly national* employers' organisation' (original emphasis), representing more than 60,000 businesses. In the lead up to the launch of the NFSS in 2012 and beyond, it was the leading recipient of federal government project funding for adult literacy/foundation skills, and it should be of little surprise that the first recommendation of its main research report states: 'Position employers at the centre of the National Foundation Skills Strategy' (AIG, 2012:78). National skills organisations such as Skills Australia (later named the Australian

Workforce and Productivity Agency) and Industry Skills Councils also played a leading role in promoting literacy as human capital and influencing government policy (Black and Yasukawa, 2016). Further, with the widespread adoption of the ACSF as the national assessment tool with links to national skill levels and the broader OECD agenda, an educational organisation specialising in ‘testing’, the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), has been keen to develop assessment tools in the competitive assessment market in VET and adult foundation skills (see the online Foundation Skills Assessment Tool at <https://www.education.gov.au/foundation-skills-assessment-tool>; and the Core Skills Profile for Adults at <https://www.acer.org/cspa/vet-student-loans>). For several years, the ACER held a national Adult LLN Assessment Conference that rivalled the annual ACAL conference.

Organisations that advise governments with recommendations for policy reform and subsequently reap financial rewards from the implementation of those reforms can be termed ‘policy entrepreneurs’ (Lingard, 2013; Black and Yasukawa, 2016). They provide research *for* policy, usually drawing on evidenced-based statistics such as those provided by the OECD surveys, and in the case of adult literacy, they work predominantly within a ‘crisis’ discourse that fits within dominant neoliberal thinking. This type of research contrasts with research *of* policy that is often critical, qualitative, seeks new knowledge, and may challenge the status quo (Black and Yasukawa, 2016).

Nationally accredited, competency-based curriculum

Adult literacy curriculum has moved very far from the individual needs-based, student-negotiated model of the 1980s, becoming ever more standardised, firstly with state-based centralised curriculum, and then with the nationally accredited competency-based curriculum now common to all literacy/foundation skills courses in TAFE and other VET colleges. Not surprisingly, especially since the

NFSS, the curriculum focus is on preparation for work, and a comprehensive FSK Foundation Skills Training Package has been developed 'that will enable learners to build the specific foundation skills required to achieve vocational competency' (Innovation & Business Skills Australia, 2013:5). Currently, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), one of the world's big four auditors, has been funded by the federal government to promote the FSK (and other training packages) to employers and training providers (see <https://www.skillsforaustralia.com/>). For students wishing to obtain employment or specific vocational qualifications, units of foundation skill competencies may be appropriate, but for many adults in the general community who simply wish to improve their literacy ability for reasons personal to them, this may not be the case.

In the TAFE NSW context in this article, the teaching sections that traditionally have provided adult literacy courses are currently struggling to provide courses that meet the needs of individual students with more general motivations for improving their literacy ability. In earlier eras in the 1980s and 1990s, these were the individuals who, for a whole range of reasons, took themselves to the local TAFE college for a free course to improve their literacy abilities (e.g. Black and Thorp, 1997), and invariably demand for classes far exceeded their supply, resulting in long waiting lists and students trying to shop around to try to find a place in other TAFE colleges. There is no reason to believe that this demand does not still exist in local communities, and indeed the national Reading Writing Hotline (<http://www.readingwritinghotline.edu.au/>), a free, government funded service to advise potential students of available literacy provision, indicates continuing demand (Iles and Finch, 2017), but it is not reflected in student numbers in TAFE courses.

Currently, TAFE colleges are being encouraged to enrol students in the latest course developed within TAFE NSW for adult literacy (i.e. foundation skills). The course is called *10582NAT Certificate 1 in Preparation for Work and Training* (see <https://training.gov.au/Training/Details/10582NAT>), and it was designed to support the NFSS. The stated purpose of the course is for students to: ‘develop preliminary employability skills and knowledge’; ‘identify realistic education, employment or community engagement goals’; and ‘participate in a formal, supported learning environment.’ To complete the course, students need to complete 12 units (6 each) from two groups of units comprising 12 and 28 units respectively. Outlined here is just one unit from the first group as an example of the type of course unit that literacy (i.e. foundation skills) students are expected to study in this course. It is entitled: *Plan to improve personal effectiveness* (Unit code PWTCOM101). The course description includes the following:

- This unit describes the performance outcomes, skills and knowledge required to make a good impression
- It requires the ability to dress appropriately, use acceptable hygiene practices and use positive body language.
- The unit applies to people who need to develop skills to respond to others and make a good impression.

Unit performance criteria indicate what is needed to demonstrate achievement in this unit, and they include: ‘Identify the benefits of making a good impression’; ‘Choose appropriate dress codes for a limited range of social situations’; and ‘Identify acceptable basic hygiene practices for a limited range of contexts’.

While this unit is just one of many in the course (others include: planning healthy lifestyle practices, accessing a basic computer, and planning to read for pleasure), it does nevertheless illustrate just how far adult literacy (foundation skills) curriculum has shifted towards a centralised industry and employability agenda. This course unit can clearly be seen to represent what one key stakeholder group, employers, would want from those who complete the course - demonstrated compliance with accepted attitudes and behaviours expected in the workplace. The course would seem to imply that students who are lacking in basic literacy abilities are also deficient in dress and hygiene practices, and as another of the course units indicates ('Plan healthy lifestyle practices'), they need to learn about eating, exercise and sleep patterns. But are these the type of practices that local community students concerned to improve their literacy ability either want or need from their literacy courses? From a critical pedagogy standpoint, these course units are the antithesis of student empowerment. They represent a deficit discourse that characterises adult literacy students in the popular media construction as 'seedy and hopeless' (Wickert 1993: 31). Such courses are unlikely to result in satisfactory employment outcomes (e.g. Atkins, 2013), and they reinforce in students the internalisation of failure and blame for their poor socio-economic status (Black & Bee 2017). As a recently retired TAFE head teacher of adult literacy commented on the above course units: 'It just makes me cry when I look at this stuff. I just think how have we got here? ... In all fairness, I just can't deliver this to the students and to the teachers'.

Audit compliance and TAFE adult literacy teachers

To ensure that teachers comply fully with the curriculum they are required to teach, there is an omnipresent audit system in TAFE, part of the more general audit culture that has developed in neoliberal societies over the past few decades based on the accounting principles of the business world (e.g. Apple, 2005; Power, 1997; Strathern, 2000). As indicated earlier in this article, Nancy

Jackson (1995) at the 1995 ACAL conference had forewarned the adult literacy field of the ‘quality agenda’ that was in the process of dominating public sectors, but few participants at that conference would have realised how this agenda would impact the adult literacy field (and TAFE as a whole) in the years to come.

The national assessment tool, the ACSF, as just one element of a totalising audit system, plays an important role as a mechanism of compliance in adult literacy programmes. Along with its predecessor, the NRS, the ACSF has enabled the commodification and thus the profit-making of adult literacy by reducing it to numbers – primarily the five levels of competency. As indicated earlier, from the late 1990s just a few years after the NRS was developed, the federal government decided to tender out funding for adult literacy in the open training market ‘based on demonstrated progress against the NRS ...’ (Wickert (1998:66). With government funding at stake, from this time onwards adult literacy providers, both public and private, have been subject to extensive audit compliance regarding their use of these national assessment tools. To ensure strict compliance, a private consultancy (*Linda Wyse Associates*) has been funded by the federal government for at least the past decade to police the use of the ACSF in federally funded literacy programmes. As all providers are aware, failure to comply with an ACSF audit could threaten their existing and/or future funding. There is some evidence of adult literacy teachers in earlier times, prior to the development of the ACSF, managing to ‘broker compliance’ with the NRS in order to remain student-centred and thus retain a sense of professional identity (Harreveld, 2004:158). Those days are now gone in an audit era in which educators are made to feel, in the best traditions of governmentality, that auditors are ‘ready to pounce’ (Black 2010:6). As a teacher commented in a study on how adult literacy pedagogy had changed over the years: ‘Auditors are ruling aren’t they, basically’ (Black 2010:15).

Indeed, every aspect of TAFE provision more generally is subject to extensive audit compliance. To date, audit compliance in TAFE NSW has been critiqued primarily by people within TAFE who have been subject to it, and not by the established academic community (e.g. Bee, 2014; Black, 2010; Black and Reich, 2010; Clark, 2003). Adult literacy teachers have commented on the oppressiveness of audit compliance, on the extensive paperwork that leads to work intensification and loss of job satisfaction, along with lack of trust and disillusionment (Black, 2010). Some experienced teachers, still clinging to the ideologies and practices of a previous era, have claimed to comply only in a minimal way with audit requirements, whilst continuing to teach much as they always have. This has been referred to as 'working the interstices' (i.e. cracks) in the system (Black, 2010). Barbara Bee (2014:215), the Freirean teacher who first taught in TAFE in the late 1970s, explains how she was audited shortly before she retired from TAFE by auditors 'who wanted a pro-forma response that I had faithfully fulfilled course requirements.' She commented on the process:

How could outside training assessors, appointed by government having little knowledge or regard for local conditions, reliably judge a teacher's performance and accountability by only examining paperwork? In such farcical situations defiance and subversion are legitimate responses. (Bee, 2014:216)

The primary effect of these audits, which are influencing all educational sectors, is to ensure centralised control over teachers' work and thus diminish their professional judgement and autonomy (e.g. Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2009). For adult literacy teachers, every element of their pedagogy is monitored to ensure that curriculum is delivered in the way prescribed in the official documentation. Defiance and subversion may well be an understandable response from some teachers, but it cannot be expected of teachers new to the

field who may be unaware of the pedagogical practices of earlier eras, and/or by teachers who simply wish to do their job in the way that their employers expect (and pay) them to.

Conclusions

The field of Australian adult literacy is now 40 years old, and the recent national ACAL conference and various state conferences have highlighted this history. This year's NSW state conference organised by the NSW Adult literacy and Numeracy Council (2017) was entitled: *40 years on: Creating spaces for learning and teaching ABE*. From the arguments and issues discussed in this article, however, there would appear to be few spaces for the type of adult literacy teaching and learning valued in the previous social-democratic era. For example, in this age of curriculum and audit compliance, where in TAFE would it be possible to practice the type of Freirean pedagogy demonstrated by Barbara Bee earlier in this article, or indeed more generally by teachers working within a student-centred approach to pedagogy? As this article has outlined, the four decades of history provide a story of the rise and fall of adult literacy as an educational field, at least in the public TAFE system, and in particular in NSW, which once boasted the largest and most professionalised adult literacy provision in the country.

A major focus in this paper is the first decade (1977-87), the rise of the field. This article has documented that era as one of inspiration and the practice of democratic values in which teachers, tutors and students believed strongly that through adult literacy provision lives were being changed for the better, transformed even (Bee, 2014). This era has been framed as one of individual 'empowerment', even if pedagogy may only rarely have corresponded to what Freire would have meant by the term. In the second decade (1988-1998), the field changed so much and so quickly that within a few years it became

'unrecognisable to those who knew it before' (Wickert, 1997:35). Adult literacy, as part of the TAFE system, became locked into an economic reform agenda in which literacy skills were valued primarily for their human capital benefits. Moreover, leading figures in the adult literacy field 'threw themselves into the task' (Wickert et al., 2007:257) of aligning the field with economic reforms, and there was no turning back. The past two decades of neoliberalism have consolidated and deepened the literacy as human capital discourse to such an extent that literacy policy and practice have become absorbed into an employability agenda, as represented with the prevailing concept of foundation skills. Teachers and students in TAFE, with little alternatives available to them, are obliged to comply with this government and industry agenda through accredited national curricula and an uncompromising audit regime. The whole process has been promoted, indeed guided, by a range of private consultants and peak industry and skills groups working in tandem with the federal government and in receipt of federal government funds. Over its four decades of history, the field overall has shifted from a focus on the public good through a no-fees public TAFE system, to become a marketised, profit making field geared towards employability. This shift reflects the effects of VET market reforms on TAFE more broadly, which have resulted in:

thousands of private providers; the erosion of technical and further education (TAFE) institutions as the public provider; the transfer of unprecedented amounts of public funding to private profits; and, scandals and rorts. (Wheelahan 2016:180)

Adult literacy provision in TAFE NSW today, repackaged as foundations skills, is but a shadow of its earlier eras. Individual adult literacy sections in TAFE NSW colleges, which once in the 1980s and early 1990s, and even up to a decade ago, offered hundreds of hours of provision each week specifically

designed to meet the literacy needs of local community residents (see Black et al., 2006 for a case study), are now mere rumps of their former sections. There are no waiting lists of students in the contemporary era, moreover, adult literacy sections in colleges are desperate to attract students in order to remain alive following years of budget cuts. The irony is that local community demand for adult literacy provision is likely to be no different to what it was in previous eras, but it remains largely unfulfilled. The national Reading Writing Hotline enquiries, for example, indicate continuing demand for adult literacy services, especially in NSW, but less than a quarter of enquiries can be termed ‘jobseekers’ (Iles and Finch, 2017). Currently, adults in the general community who wish to attend their local TAFE college in order to improve their literacy abilities for a range of personal reasons, are faced with a number of barriers, including: how much will a course cost them, and will any course be appropriate to their needs and what they want given TAFE’s exclusive focus on employability? Thirty years ago, as indicated earlier in this article, Audrey Grant (1987) at a time of optimism for the future, wrote of TAFE’s ‘opportunity to do brilliantly’ in its provision of adult literacy. That opportunity has long been lost and has become a distant memory for literacy educators who experienced the empowerment era of the 1980s.

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